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# Making & Missing Opportunities: Part-Time Higher Education in the East of England



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Roger Mills**

Von Hügel Institute  
St Edmund's College  
Cambridge



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Cambridge

**EUROPEAN UNION European Social Fund  
EEDA East of England Development Agency  
UN EAST**

# Making and Missing Opportunities: Part-Time Higher Education in the East of England

Michael Watts, Jane Cullen & Roger Mills

Centre for Educational Research and Development

Von Hügel Institute

St Edmund's College

Cambridge

Executive Summary



## **Executive Summary**

The research we report on here set out to examine the extent to which undergraduate level part-time higher education contributes to economic and social development in the East of England. The regional economic strategy has called attention to the importance of higher education; but full-time study is simply not an option for the majority of people who did not, for whatever reason, progress to higher education from school and college. Part-time study, however, offers them the opportunity to engage with higher education whilst continuing to maintain the obligations of their family, social and working lives.

Although part-time study has the potential to make a significant contribution to the economic development of the region, as well as to the lives of its part-time students, it remains typically undervalued and under-resourced. This is, at least in part, because it is too often seen as an add-on to more traditional forms of higher education. In the main report, we therefore provide a statistical overview of part-time higher education in the East of England and present case studies of twelve part-time students to highlight its importance.

The statistical study compares part-time and full-time study in the East of England and provides comparative analyses of the total numbers of undergraduate level students as well as analyses in terms of gender, age, ethnicity and destination upon graduation. These analyses establish that almost half of the total undergraduate population in the region and almost a third of those studying for a first degree are engaged in part-time study. Within the context of concerns about the net outflow of graduates from the region, the study makes clear that part-time students are far more likely to remain within the region on graduating than their full-time peers. The analyses also suggest a significantly lower age profile of part-time students than that indicated in other studies and this highlights the potential (explored in greater detail in the qualitative study) for part-time higher education to articulate with enhanced employment opportunities.

However, whilst calling attention to the importance of the further education sector in the delivery of part-time higher education, these analyses also show that part-time provision in the region is dominated by two institutions – the Open University and Anglia Ruskin University. This suggests that other institutions place less value and invest less in part-time study.

The results of a questionnaire distributed to students in seven regional universities and colleges offering part-time study underline the relationships between part-time higher education, work and personal satisfaction. They also indicate the advantages and disadvantages of part-time higher education. The main advantages were that it is more affordable, that it allows for better quality and more reflective study that has practical applications for work and that it enables some balance between study, family responsibilities and work commitments. On the downside, it does not always allow enough time for study, it can lead to a sense of isolation from both part-time peers and tutors, institutions are not always geared towards part-time study and it can be detrimental to family and social relationships. The advantages and disadvantages, then, are often the different sides of the same coin.

These issues, and their complexities, are explored in greater detail in the main report through a series of narrative case studies illustrating the experiences of twelve part-time students from the region. These cases highlight the importance of part-time study to the widening participation agenda – both in terms of increasing the overall number of students in higher education of engaging those from historically under-represented groups.

The analyses of the cases provide insight into the different reasons people have for studying part-time, the range of viable options available to them, the costs of part-time study and the factors that influence choice. They examine the real opportunities part-time study provides for meaningful engagement with higher education and they stress the social nature of learning. Further analyses address the benefits of part-time higher education to the individual students and to the region.

Examples of part-time study in the private sector are also included in the main report and we include an insight into the employers' perspective of part-time study.

The final sections address the ways in which individuals, institutions and industry can invest in part-time higher education and recommendations for realising its potential.

At the regional level, the Association of Universities in the East of England, in collaboration with the East of England Development Agency and other partners in the Regional Skills and Competitiveness Partnership, should:

- coordinate the publication of a regional prospectus setting out the advantages of part-time study and the opportunities it offers and strenuously promote part-time higher education to employers through the Skills for Business Network, the CBI, Business Links and other agencies;
- promote and progress – with appropriate business sector support – the development of e-learning courses relevant to regional priorities as an extension of existing part-time study opportunities;
- establish a Learning and Skills Sub-group (in line with most other Regional Higher Education Associations) which would have a specific remit to support and promote part-time higher education and which would liaise with and incorporate representatives from the Association of Colleges in the Eastern Region, the Regional Skills and Competitiveness Partnership, i10, Investing in Communities, the Skills for Business Network and regional businesses and industry;
- conduct an audit of all part-time provision in the region;
- coordinate an annual conference reviewing and promoting part-time higher education;
- make representations to the Higher Education Funding Council and regional MPs concerning the need for parity of government support for part- and full-time students; and
- make representations to the Higher Education Statistics Agency concerning the need to record Open University statistics on a regional as well as national basis to enable full regional analyses to be undertaken.

Institutions should:

- make clear their policies concerning part-time study;
- consider whether to focus more part-time courses in linked FE colleges rather than main university campuses;
- review their fee payment systems to enable part-time students to pay in monthly instalments; and
- make representations to local MPs concerning the need for parity of government support for part- and full-time students.
- offer diagnostic or taster courses to help potential students understand what is expected when studying for a higher education (whether part- or full-time); and
- enhance (or, where necessary, introduce) specific induction courses (not necessarily face-to-face) for part-time students.
- liaise more closely with regional and local business and industry and the Skills for Business Network to develop appropriate part-time programmes.
- seriously investigate the use of e-learning as a tool to increase the take-up of part-time higher education and the successful retention of part-time students; and
- examine the potential for using Open University materials in support of their part-time students.
- review the availability of facilities and support for part-time students (e.g. library, counselling/advice and careers services) and explore options that increase their accessibility (e.g. on-line and telephone options as well as occasional evening and/or weekend opening hours);
- take steps to ensure part-time students, and potential part-time students, are aware of and can access governmental and/or institutional financial support packages;
- make efforts to ensure that part-time students feel part of the institutional community and ensure they are made fully aware of the facilities and support available to them as members of those communities; and
- investigate the use of mobile messaging as a means of keeping in touch with part-time students.
- review and enhance part-time student records to generate databases providing greater knowledge of who takes up part-time study, their motivation and success;
- develop and publicise case studies illustrating how part-time higher education has helped both individual students and employers in the region in order to increase awareness of the value of part-time study to both individuals and employers; and
- consider establishing (in conjunction with EEDA, AUEE, the Regional Skills and Competitiveness Partnership and the wider business community) annual awards for those part-time students who have achieved the most in using their studies to enhance their careers.





Making and Missing  
Opportunities:  
Part-Time Higher Education in  
the East of England

Full Report



## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

There are considerable reserves of skills, experience and talent in the East of England that higher education can direct towards regional development. Yet perceptions of higher education continue to be dominated by traditional forms of provision – full-time campus-based study for young people progressing from school and college with the ‘gold standard’ of A levels.

Part-time study has the potential to tap into the regional reserves and enable more people, and more people from historically under-represented groups, to engage with higher education. It allows people to study while continuing to work (although maintaining the study-work-home balance is rarely easy) and therefore has a greater potential for making those studies more specifically relevant to their work. It offers a viable second chance to those who, for whatever reason, did not progress to higher education from school or college. Moreover, as the direct and indirect costs of full-time study continue rising, part-time study is likely to become a more attractive alternative for school leavers.

Yet this potential is neither fully appreciated nor utilised. Here, in this report, we present a picture of undergraduate level part-time higher education in the East of England and examine its contribution to the regional economic and social strategies, its future potential and its problems.

Many of the issues concerning its successful provision and delivery may be linked to the failure to recognise that almost half the undergraduate population of the East of England and nearly a third of those studying for a first degree are studying part-time. We therefore give a statistical overview of part-time provision across the East of England that establishes the extent to which part-time study is already contributing to the region in terms of delivering higher education to its population and stemming the net outflow of graduates. It also draws attention to the role of the further education sector in delivering higher education. However, it also indicates the different approaches the region’s universities have taken towards part-time study and suggests that it is not something they hold in equal value.

The results of a questionnaire distributed across seven of the region’s universities and colleges highlights the links between part-time study and enhanced employment opportunities. Case studies drawn from the expectations and experiences of twelve part-time students are then examined to fill in the gaps between the statistical numbers and offer insight into the day-to-day realities of part-time higher education. These cases indicate the motivation of students engaged in part-time study, its highs and lows and the contribution it makes to their lives. They show how part-time study can articulate with the changing aspirations of individuals and the changing dynamics of their work environments. Importantly, the cases also clearly indicate that full-time study was simply not an option for these students. Further case studies address part-time study in the private sector and the employers’ perspectives of part-time study.

Part-time higher education can make a significant contribution to regional and social development in the East of England. However, it requires investment if it is to fulfil its potential and we conclude with a series of recommendations that will enable this.



## ***Part-Time Higher Education in the Regional Context***

National and regional policies have identified higher education as an essential element in promoting and sustaining economic growth and widening participation as a means of tackling social inequalities (EEDA, 2002, 2004; DfES, 2003).

In the East of England, the *Regional Economic Strategy* (EEDA, 2004) expressly prioritises increased participation in higher education – both in terms of increasing the numbers of people with the higher level skills that a higher education is supposed to provide and increasing the numbers of participants from groups historically under-represented in higher education – as a means of establishing a ‘skills base that can support a world class economy’ (pp. 24-31). It also recognises that increased opportunities for education and employment are key factors in overcoming social exclusion; and the widening participation agenda therefore articulates with the goal of promoting ‘social inclusion and broad participation in the regional economy’ (pp. 56-62). The Regional Assembly’s *Regional Social Strategy* reflects these links between employment opportunities and social and educational inclusion (EERA, 2004).

The economic argument is couched in terms of a virtuous (economic) circle in which a more highly skilled workforce drives the economy forward towards greater investment in the new industries that demand a highly skilled workforce. The circle revolves around higher education and increasing participation in higher education, it is argued, is necessary to keep it spinning. This argument is ‘neatly symmetrical’ with the promulgation of social justice through higher education as much of the real talent of the region may well be found in those very under-represented sections of the population (Watts & Bridges, 2004, 2006).

Realising this argument in practice, though, is difficult. A significant proportion of the workforce does not possess the higher level skills denoted by higher education and higher education is still seen as irrelevant to the lives and lifestyles of a majority of the country’s population, including those from historically under-represented groups targeted by current widening participation policies (Archer *et al*, 2003; Watts & Bridges, 2004, 2006; Reay *et al*, 2005; Watts, 2006). This is particularly problematic if those excluded social groups harbour the talents and skills that higher education can develop and that the economy depends on. Yet progression to and through higher education is no guarantee that these widening participation students will progress to ‘better’ employment (Dearing, 1997; Brennan & Shah, 2003) and simply increasing the number of people with higher level skills may lead to an over-qualified workforce frustrated that its skills are redundant (DTI, 2003).

In the East of England, there are particular concerns about the net outflow of graduates from across the region as a whole and the *Regional Economic Strategy* therefore makes clear that increasing the number of people with higher level skills must go hand in hand with increasing the number of opportunities for them to employ those skills (EEDA, 2004, p. 29). However, this merely points to the continuing failure of industry and the higher education sector to properly articulate their requirements of each other. Regional Skills Partnerships (in the East of England, the Regional Skills and Competitiveness Partnership) task the Skills for Business Network with responsibility for identifying the skills employers need and higher education with ‘ensuring that the higher skills needs of the region are properly

identified and evidenced', 'increasing responsiveness of HEIs to business need' and 'ensuring provision is better aligned to the employment needs of the region' (Williams & Swift, 2006). Furthermore, if industry is to capitalise on the knowledge and skills of the regional graduate workforce, it must respond to the central government determination to re-position students as 'consumers' paying their way through the market place of higher education and invest in those student-consumers.

Part-time higher education has considerable potential to address these concerns (Fuller, 2001) and therefore make a significant contribution to the *Regional Economic Strategy* (KPMG, 2003). The preliminary findings of a national statistical study commissioned by Universities UK (2005) suggests that a majority of people in part-time higher education are studying to enhance their current employment; and our own research adds qualitative support to that argument at the regional level. As a majority of part-time students are in employment, it can therefore serve as a conduit for the regional need to:

develop more effective mechanisms for matching supply and demand of higher level skills, including greater and more effective integration of the higher education offer into the wider business support infrastructure, and schemes that encourage mutual exchange of experience and expertise between higher education and business (EEDA, 2004, p. 29).

Moreover, by giving a 'genuinely real-life perspective to higher education, effectively linking it with the society of which it is an integral and crucially important part' (Tight 1991, p. 144) it can engage those who would otherwise see higher education as irrelevant to their lives and lifestyles, thereby addressing the need for higher education to reach out to historically under-represented groups.

However, traditional forms of full-time study still cast a shadow over the widening participation agenda (Bridges, 2000); and two recent studies from the region (Watts & Bridges, 2004; Kukhareva & Kendall, 2005) show that many young people remain unaware of the part-time route through higher education. National and regional policies routinely fail to distinguish between part-time and full-time study and therefore continue to alienate those for whom full-time study is irrelevant or impossible. Furthermore, calls to increase participation typically echo the government's focus on the 18-30 year old cohort and pay little attention to the needs of older students who may want to engage with higher education.

And, as if all this were not enough, it has been argued that academic communities and policymakers have tended to view part-time higher education in a negative light (Davies, 1999).

## ***Higher Education in the East of England***

As of May 2006, the Association of Universities in the East of England represented twelve regional higher education institutions:

- Anglia Ruskin University (formerly Anglia Polytechnic University)
- the University of Cambridge
- Cranfield University
- the University of East Anglia
- the University of Essex
- the University of Hertfordshire
- Homerton School of Health Studies (now formally part of the Anglia Ruskin Group of Companies)
- the University of Luton (to be reconstituted as the University of Bedfordshire from August 2006)
- the Norwich School of Art and Design
- the Open University in the East of England
- the Royal Veterinary College
- Writtle College

In this report, however, we make use of the figures provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) which excludes the Royal Veterinary College from the regional profile because its main campus is located beyond the region in London and the Open University in the East of England which HESA considers only as a national higher education institute (with its headquarters in Milton Keynes). Of the other ten institutions, Cranfield, Homerton, NSAD and Writtle College each have a particular and narrowly defined focus and (within the context of our study of part-time higher education at undergraduate levels) Cranfield is a graduate university.

Additionally, the Further Education sector makes a significant contribution to the provision of higher education in the East of England (EEDA, 2004) with some three quarters of the 38 members of the Association of Colleges in the Eastern Region currently delivering higher education to one in ten of the region's part-time undergraduate students.

For the qualitative aspect of this research we worked with students from seven of these institutions – Anglia Ruskin University, the Universities of East Anglia and Luton, North Hertfordshire College, the Open University in the East of England, Suffolk College and Peterborough Regional College. These seven institutions represent the diversity of part-time higher education provision across the region: the Open University has more than twenty thousand registered part-time undergraduate students whilst at UEA (where there are less than one hundred students on part-time undergraduate programmes other than nursing, social work and continuing education) it can, as one tutor observed, be easy to forget that there is any part-time provision at undergraduate level. In the further education sector, Suffolk College has several thousand part-time students while North Hertfordshire College has several hundred.

## ***Defining Part-Time Higher Education***

According to HESA:

**Full-time** students are those normally required to attend an institution for periods amounting to at least 24 weeks within the year of programme of study, on thick or thin sandwich courses, and those on a study-related year out of their institution. During that time students are normally expected to undertake periods of study, tuition or work experience which amount to an average of at least 21 hours per week..

**Part-time** students are those recorded as studying part-time, or studying full-time on courses lasting less than 24 weeks, on block release, or studying during the evenings only, students writing-up theses or on sabbatical, except where these have been tabulated separately (HESA Student Record, 2002/03, 2003/04).

However, part-time study is a shifting concept. Many full-time students now work during term time as well as in their vacations (*inter alia* Callender & Kemp, 2000; Metcalf, 2003); and part-time students may well spent as much time studying as their full-time counterparts. Work-based learning and higher level vocational qualifications both blur the distinction between full- and part-time study. For the purposes of this study, we defined part-time students as those students registering for higher education courses on a part-time basis.

## ***Funding Part-Time Study***

We address the issue of funding throughout the report but it should be noted that this research took place against a background of changes to the ways higher education is funded by the government and paid for by the students. Although these changes had obviously not influenced the decisions of the students we worked with to study part-time, and whilst part-time study can make higher education more financially viable, it is likely that these changes will exacerbate at least some of the financial difficulties faced by future generations of part-time students. The new support package for part-time students that will be available from the 2005/06 academic year will include grants for both tuition fees and other course cost but the prognosis is not good: unlike those studying full-time, part-time students will not get loans to cover their fees and will have to pay this cost up-front. Government funding for part-time study will remain less generous than for full-time study and, as Ivor Crewe has argued, there is a need to level these playing fields to ensure that it remains an attractive option to cash-strapped institutions (2005).

## ***The Research***

Within these contexts, the research set out to investigate the delivery and acquisition of higher level skills and qualifications through part-time higher education. It was directed towards Goals One (*A skills base that can support a world-class economy*) and Five (*Social inclusion and broad participation in the regional economy*) of the *Regional Economic Strategy* with a particular focus on the regional need to:

- develop higher level skills to support the knowledge economy (goal one, priority four); and
- support those who are disadvantaged to achieve their potential (goal five, priority one).

The particular focus of the research was higher education delivered at undergraduate level and therefore included foundation and honours degrees but excluded postgraduate study. However, we recognised that higher level studies are not the exclusive preserve of the universities and further education colleges delivering higher education and therefore extended the research to include the part-time study of higher level programmes in the private and not-for-profit sectors.

This report draws upon both quantitative and qualitative datasets.

Data were obtained from HESA (the Higher Education Statistics Agency) to provide a quantitative overview of part-time study across the region. This was supplemented by data from the Open University in the East of England.

Questionnaires were sent to students at selected institutions inviting them to participate in the qualitative research. The responses to these questionnaires bridge the two major datasets.

Detailed biographic interviews were conducted with students at selected institutions across the region and located their accounts of part-time higher education within the wider contexts of their social, economic, employment and domestic backgrounds.

In selecting students to participate in the qualitative research, we worked with seven institutions from across the region (four universities and three further education colleges) and identified one institution from each of the region's six counties as well as the Open University in the East of England, as follows:

- Anglia Ruskin University (Chelmsford campus)
- The University of East Anglia
- Luton University
- North Hertfordshire College
- The Open University in the East of England
- Peterborough Regional College
- Suffolk College

Questionnaires were used to recruit students to the qualitative dimension of the research rather than to generate a database for statistical analysis. Our concern was to

identify students representing the diversity – in terms of gender, social class, ethnicity and subjects being studied – rather than the typicality of part-time students in and across the participating institutions. The responses to the questionnaires were cross-checked with regional data supplied by HESA to ensure that, as far as possible, these students who had returned the questionnaires represented the diversity of part-time students at the participating institutions and across the region. Where necessary (for example, where proportionately low responses were received from male and ethnic minority students) we liaised with the participating institutions to target students from under-represented social groups. Thirty six students were then invited to take part in in-depth interviews. The twelve case studies in this report were selected to represent the diversity of part-time students in and across the participating institutions and across the region as a whole.

To avoid the risk of ‘data overload’ our intention was to distribute the questionnaires to all part-time students at those institutions with no more than 500 part-time students and to target final year students at those institutions (Anglia Ruskin University and the Open University) with more than 500 part-time students<sup>1</sup>. However, as the questionnaires were sent to the students via institutional gatekeepers, the method of distribution varied according to what these gatekeepers considered appropriate and viable. Some of the university gatekeepers distributed the questionnaires via the students’ institutional email accounts (and were followed up by more specifically targeted mail distributions where there were particularly low return rates) and others sent out paper copies. It was not possible to distribute the questionnaires electronically in the further education colleges and so paper copies were sent out at North Hertfordshire and Peterborough Regional Colleges. This was not possible at Suffolk College where it became necessary for us to liaise with staff in order to recruit students directly. As our intention was to identify students to take part in the in-depth interviews rather than to generate a database for statistical analysis, these different distribution methods did not compromise the validity of the research. Nevertheless, whilst we make no claims to its statistical significance, analysis of these questionnaires usefully contextualises the in-depth case studies.

The questionnaires were sent out to some 3,750 students across all the participating institutions (except Suffolk College) and 162 were returned to give an overall response rate of 4.1% (or approximately one in 23). However, the different distribution methods resulted in significantly (but unsurprisingly) different response rates. Where they were distributed by email, the response rate varied from 1.25% (or one in 80) to 8% (or one in 13). Where paper copies were posted out (with stamped envelopes included for their return) the response rate was 17.5% (or approximately one in six). Where they were handed out to students in class, the response rate leapt to 62% (with eight out of 13 students in one class completing and returning them).

Six students from each of the universities and two from each of the colleges were invited and agreed to take part in extended biographic interviews. As nurses comprise a distinct and significant proportion of part-time students (both regionally and nationally) a further cohort of six nurses from all institutions offering nursing degrees were also invited to participate.

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<sup>1</sup> Part-time students on health-related programmes were recruited separately.

These thirty six biographic case studies enabled us to obtain insights into the intrinsic and instrumental value part-time higher education had for these students. Our analysis was guided by key inter-related issues concerning part-time higher education:

- the relationships between part-time study, employment and knowledge transfer;
- the various mechanisms and policies in place to support part-time students; and
- the influence of part-time study on the aspirations of students.

Twelve of these cases are presented here to illustrate the most salient issues arising from the research. In keeping with the tradition of biographic research, the cases are narrative and use the words of the participants in order to emphasise that part-time higher education is a real experience negotiated, valued and even enjoyed by real people. The cases enable the reader to ascertain the validity of the qualitative analysis presented in this report and offer a rich data source for further analysis.

Further case studies address the employers' perspectives of part-time higher education and part-time study in the private sector.

These case studies, contextualised by the statistical analysis of part-time higher education in the East of England, inform the final section which addresses the issue of investment in part-time higher education and leads into a series of recommendations.

# **Statistical Overview of HE Provision in the East of England**

## ***Introduction***

The statistical analysis in this section provides an overview of part-time higher education in the East of England and establishes a wider context for the case studies focusing on the experiences of individual students below. General comparisons are made between the part-time provision at different higher education institutions (HEIs) across the region. We also provide more specific views of provision at the four HEIs that had collaborated in this study (Anglia Ruskin University, the Universities of East Anglia and Luton and the Open University in the East of England) and set regional data alongside national data to examine the extent to which regional trends reflect what is happening across England.

Data is collected annually from all HEIs in the UK by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). This data provides information not only on the numbers of full- and part-time students in higher education but also, for example, on their gender, age, ethnicity, occupation, choice of subject and on what happens to them once they have completed their studies. The latest data available which could be used in this study was that for the academic year 2003/04 and all references to student numbers are from this dataset unless otherwise stated. However, we also made use of the HESA data for 2002/03 and of data supplied by the Open University in the East of England for 2004.

Here we use these datasets to examine and compare the provision of part-time and full-time higher education in the region, including levels of undergraduate study (first, foundation and 'other' undergraduate degrees). We also consider part-time higher education in terms of gender, age, ethnicity and the destinations of those who graduate.

## **Limitations of the Statistical Analysis**

HESA data can give a good but only partial picture of part-time higher education in the region. HESA data does not give details of what HE courses are actually taught at collaborating FE colleges. All HE degree courses delivered in further education colleges in the Eastern region are validated by an HEI, and one HEI in the region may have arrangements with several FE colleges teaching its courses. The Higher Education Funding Council for England provides a simple breakdown of undergraduate numbers at each FE college (HEFCE, 2004) and reference is made to this data below, but there is not as yet a statistical database for the further education sector that will enable detailed and specific analyses of, for example, the age, gender, ethnicity and choice of course of part-time HE students in FE. Particularly given the government proposal to increase the number of HE students in the further education colleges as a means of meeting its widening participation targets (DfES, 2003) there is a clear need for such a database.

HESA data excludes all the Open University students living and studying in the Eastern region. This anomaly arises from HESA's definition of the Open University as an HEI in England rather than one with a particular regional presence. But this is



to ignore the major presence of the Open University in Eastern England: the OU has more undergraduates than any other HEI in the region. We have incorporated OU statistics into our analysis where possible in this section but the way in which HESA supplies data makes the amalgamation of the regional OU data impossible in many cases.

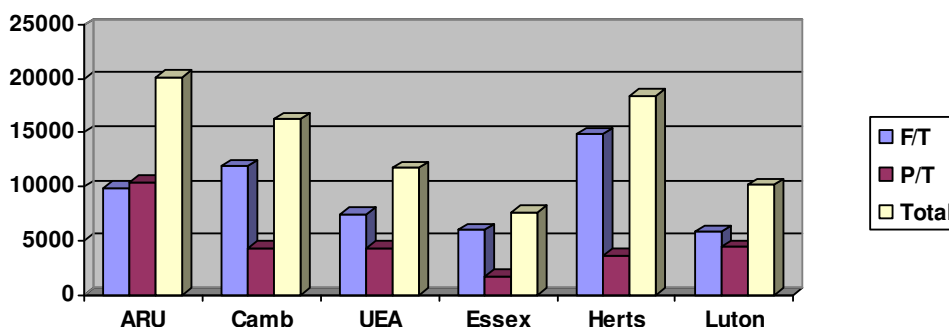
Nonetheless, with these caveats, what HESA data can do is give a detailed breakdown of the extent and type of part-time study in the institutions it deems to be HEIs in the Eastern region. And the fact that it collects data annually means that it is possible to analyse comparisons and to plot trends over time.

### ***Full- and Part-Time Higher Education in the East of England***

In 2003/04 there were 88,992 undergraduate students registered at HEIs in the Eastern region of whom 30,449 were studying part-time. This means that just over one third of all undergraduate students in the region (34.2%) were studying part-time. The proportion of part-time students was similar for the previous academic year. Based on the HESA figures, part-time undergraduate study is therefore highly significant in terms of the overall undergraduate provision across the region. However, these figures exclude Open University students – all of whom are considered to be studying part-time – and if the 20,720 OU undergraduate students are included, then almost half (47%) of the total undergraduate population in the East of England was studying part-time in 2003/04.

However, the proportions of full- and part-time students are played out quite differently in different institutions in the region. Half the undergraduate students at Anglia Ruskin (10,359 of 20,212) were part-time but at the University of Essex the proportion was less than a quarter (1,682 of 7,614) and at the University of Hertfordshire fewer than a fifth of students (3,596 of 18,446) were studying part-time.

**Figure 1: Eastern region: numbers and mode of undergraduate study 2003/04**



(HESA Student Record, 2003/04)

Statistics at this broad level of detail can conceal as much as they reveal. It is perhaps not surprising that Luton and Anglia Ruskin had high proportions of part-time students given that they are post-1992 universities with reputations for inclusivity and widening participation. Amongst the pre-1992 universities, the proportions of part-time students were much lower at Essex but surprisingly high at Cambridge and UEA. However, these high proportions can be accounted for by continuing education courses and (at UEA) health-related studies, particularly nursing degrees. The low proportion of part-time undergraduate students at the University of Hertfordshire remains a puzzle, particularly given its large network of affiliated FE colleges.

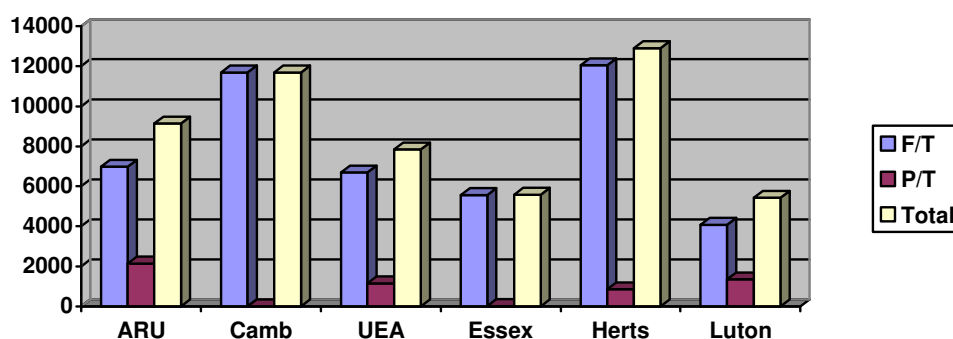
### ***Levels of Undergraduate Study***

Although typically associated with study towards a first degree (most commonly a BA or BSc) undergraduate study covers a spectrum of courses, including the recently introduced foundation degrees. However there are a large number of other courses offered at HEIs at undergraduate level. These include vocational qualifications such as the HNC and HND which can give alternative progression routes through to a first degree. But this category of ‘other’ undergraduate courses also includes those leading to no formal qualification or to a qualification offering no formal progression route (although several students participating in the qualitative study had progressed to honours courses from continuing education courses). The particular range of ‘other’ undergraduate courses offered by each HEI is likely to be unique and may well have been determined by local traditions and conditions.

### **First degree study**

As can be seen in figure 2 below, according to the HESA data, the great majority of first degree students in the Eastern region are full-time. In 2003/04 there were 48,801 full-time students and only 5,696 part-time students. That is, only slightly more than 1 in 10 first degree students were part-time.

**Figure 2: Eastern region: numbers & mode of study for first degree  
2003/04**



(HESA Student Record, 2003/04)

However, this is to disregard the presence of the Open University. A particular difficulty in assessing the contribution of the OU here is that the flexibility and adaptability of its part-time provision make it difficult to discern the level of study of its undergraduate students.

Previously students taking Open University credits were returned as studying at other undergraduate level... although the credits gained could count towards the award of a first degree... In 2003/04 Open University students were reported according to their recorded award intention and the broad subject of that award intention at the HESA return date. It should be noted that Open University students do not have to declare an award intention (HESA Student Record, 2003/04).

A further complication with the integration of data from the Open University is that there is no time limit on its degree programmes (and in the case studies, for example, Heather took more than ten years to complete hers). With the HESA data supplying a snapshot of only one or two years, this can make the longer term approach of the OU difficult to assimilate statistically. However, in the data supplied to us by the OU for the Eastern region, 5,080 of its 20,720 students (24.5%) had 'no award intention' and this means that the remaining 15,640 students were potential first degree students. Assuming this figure to be appropriate, when added to the HESA numbers, there were some 70,137 students in the East of England studying for a first degree in 2003/04, of whom 21,336 were studying part-time. That is, 30% of first degree students in the East of England were studying part-time.

### **Foundation degree study**

There are marked institutional differences in provision of foundation degrees, including whether institutions offer them at all and whether they are offered part-time or full-time (see also Seiffert & Mills, 2005). Anglia Ruskin and the University of Hertfordshire are the two main HEIs offering foundation degrees (or validating foundation degree courses through partner FE colleges) in the region; and in both cases there was a fairly even split between full-time and part-time provision. Neither Cambridge nor UEA offer foundation degrees (although UEA now validates foundation degrees offered through its affiliated further education colleges).

Numbers of both part-time and full-time students on foundation degrees in the region are low although they nearly doubled between 2002/03 (985 in total) and 2003/04 (1,738 in total). Within this dramatic increase, the proportion of part-time students increased slightly. Given their recent introduction, it would be unwise to extrapolate this growth or predict trends on the basis of these figures. Yet whilst these relatively low numbers suggest this is a qualification that has yet to develop any kind of broad appeal in the East of England, evidence from other sources indicates that they are set to gain in importance (at least in some of the region's HEIs). In particular, HEFCE's most recent allocation of additional student numbers for the region (and across the country) focussed on foundation degrees. This would account, at least in part, for the increased interest shown by some HEIs in foundation degrees. For example, the HESA statistics for foundation degrees at Luton University were relatively low compared, say, with the University of Hertfordshire or Anglia Ruskin. However,

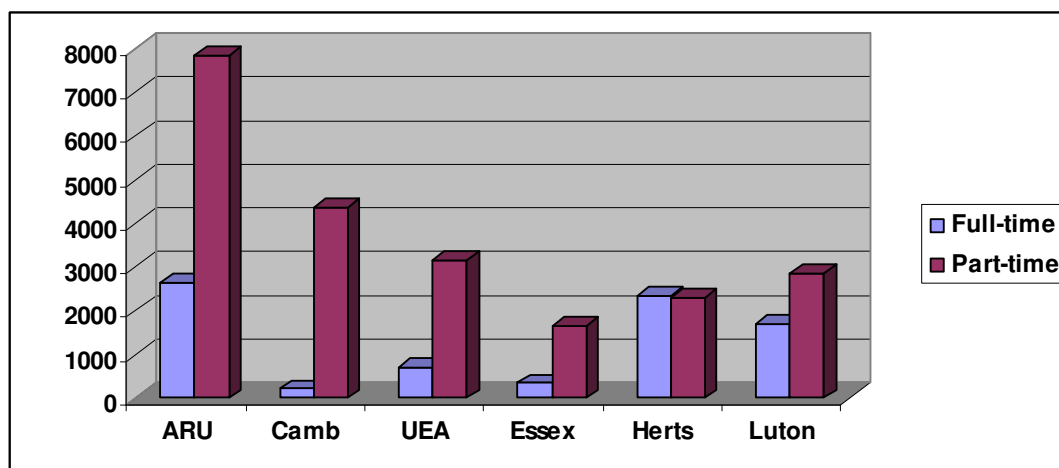
HESA data refers to student numbers two years in the past and this takes no account of the ways in which Luton is currently developing its provision – there are now 43 foundation degree courses advertised in its 2006/07 prospectus (with 17 of them being offered part-time) and the university has plans to increase the number of students on foundation degrees to approximately 1,500 (with 1,000 of these taught in its partner institutions).

### **‘Other’ undergraduate courses**

According to HESA:

**Other undergraduate** includes qualification aims below degree level such as diplomas in HE with eligibility to register to practice with a Health or Social Care regulatory body, Higher National Diploma (HND), Higher National Certificate (HNC), Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE), Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE), foundation courses at HE level, NVQ/SVQ levels 4 and 5, post-degree diplomas and certificates at undergraduate level, professional qualifications at undergraduate level, other undergraduate diplomas and certificates including post registration health and social care courses, other formal HE qualifications of less than degree standard, institutional undergraduate credit and no formal undergraduate qualifications (HESA Student Record, 2002/03, 2003/04).

**Figure 3: Eastern region: numbers and mode of study for ‘other’ undergraduate courses 2003/04**



(HESA Student Record, 2003/04)

The HESA data shows that for 2003/04 the majority of part-time students in the region (23,774) were engaged in ‘other’ undergraduate courses – that is, a course other than a first degree or foundation degree. Again, this does not take into account the more difficult-to-define statistics of the Open University. At all the ‘brick and mortar’ universities, ‘other undergraduate’ course were particularly popular with part-

time students. Almost three in every four students (23,774 out of a total of 32,757) students on an 'other' undergraduate course were part-time. With the exception of the University of Hertfordshire, the clear majority of students at each of the HEIs illustrated in figure 3 were part-time, with particularly high numbers at Anglia Ruskin and Cambridge and high proportions as well at UEA and Essex. However, 'other' undergraduate numbers dropped across the region over the two years.

Whilst the specific focus of our research was the part-time study of first and foundation degrees, the number of students on 'other' undergraduate courses is both significant and encouraging as these courses can (as the case studies illustrate) serve as progression routes to other degrees. However, the popularity of 'other' undergraduate courses (for part-time as well as full-time students) decreased between 2002/03 and 2003/04. During this period, both part-time and full-time numbers for first degrees and foundation degrees increased and it would seem that part-time study is becoming slightly more popular as a mode of study for these two qualifications.

## **Summary**

The fact that, according to HESA, so much present part-time undergraduate provision is at the level of 'other' undergraduate might suggest that this mode of study is favoured for the provision of discrete courses and that there are inherent limitations in the kinds of course available for those studying part-time. This is to disregard the open-endedness of the courses provided by the Open University, the progression to degree level possible through credit accumulation and credit transfer and the increasing popularity of foundation degrees. Though the foundation degree is a qualification which nationally is still under-recognised at present (Wagner *et al*, 2004) and has a lower spread and take up in the Eastern region than in other regions (QAA, 2005) its popularity is increasing and it aims to provide a clear progression route to a first degree, though nationally and (it must be assumed) regionally, this articulation is still developing (Wagner *et al*, 2004; Foster, 2005; QAA, 2005).

## ***Part-Time Students in the Further Education Sector***

HEFCE publishes tables on its website of the numbers of students who are registered at a higher education institution (HEI) but taught by another institution. The teaching institution is often, but not necessarily always, a further education college. HEFCE (2004, p. 2) warns that this data needs to be treated with caution as several datasets from different sources are used to compile it and relationships between HEIs and collaborating institutions can be very complex to record statistically. These tables separately record 'wholly franchised' students (that is, those taught completely at another institution) and 'partly franchised' (where the student studies some of the time at the HEI and some at the collaborating institution). For our purposes, however, we have combined these two categories, as we wish simply to see how many HE students are studying at other institutions rather than how many are spending the whole year at the alternative location. HEFCE can only provide one corresponding year, the academic year 2002/3, to the bespoke HESA data that we used.

Altogether, 3,101 part-time students registered at an HEI in the region (by headcount) were studying at least some of their HE course elsewhere in the region in 2002/03. The corresponding figure for full-time undergraduate students was higher, with 4,008 students. The University of Cambridge did not have any students, full- or part-time, registered in this way. UEA had 20 undergraduate students being taught full-time at Lowestoft College but no part-time ones. The University of Luton had relatively few, with 294 full-time and 193 part-time HE students spread across three FE colleges and a sixth form college. The University of Essex had 415 full-time and 127 part-time undergraduates with the great majority of both full-time and part-time being taught at South East Essex College. ARU was the university in the region with the widest range of partners and the highest numbers of both full-time and part-time undergraduate students. There were almost equal numbers of full-time (2,010) and part-time (2,098).

**Figure 4: HE Students registered 2002/03 at ARU but taught by another institution**

ARU	Full-time	Part-time
Norwich School of Art and Design	105	
Braintree College		18
Cambridge Regional College	122	105
Chelmsford College		52
Colchester Institute	513	243
Easton College	31	22
Epping Forest College		35
Great Yarmouth College of Further Education	51	83
Huntingdonshire Regional College	14	119
Isle College		4
Lowestoft College	35	111
Norwich City College of Further and Higher Education	751	713
Seevic College	74	18
Thurrock and Basildon College		150
College of West Anglia	168	143
West Suffolk College	146	282

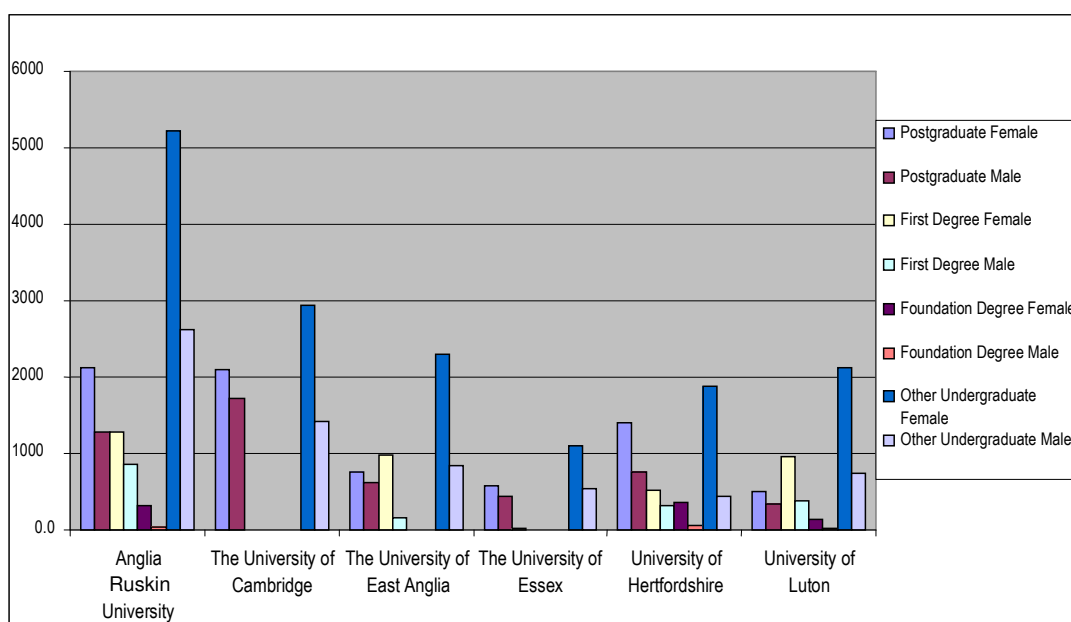
As can be seen with the example of Anglia Ruskin, the flexibility of provision associated with part-time study applies to place as well as to time. The delivery of higher education programmes through the region's further education colleges increases accessibility for those who might otherwise find it difficult to make a longer journey to the university campus; and, elsewhere in the region, both Suffolk College and Peterborough Regional College fill higher education holes (EEDA, 2004). Moreover, widening access to part-time undergraduate programmes at the local colleges has the potential to strengthen access and retention in higher education by providing on-the-spot progression routes in already familiar surroundings and easing students into higher education (DfES, 2003; Cristofoli & Watts, forthcoming).

## Gender

Across the region, women studying part-time outnumbered men at every HEI in 2003/04. The difference was most marked at ‘other’ undergraduate level where at each HEI in the Eastern region, and with large numbers involved, there are more than twice as many women as men. This distinction also applied at first degree and at foundation degree level, but with far fewer numbers. As can be seen from figure 5, it was only at post graduate level that there was markedly greater parity, though there were still more women than men studying part-time.

National figures for part-time study show parallels with the Eastern region: at ‘other’ undergraduate level, there was a ratio of more than two females for every male (164,150 female to 78,595 male students or 21:10) in 2003/04; and at first degree level there was a national ratio of about 9:5 in favour of female students (38,970 female to 21,945 male students) compared with a regional ratio of 11:5 (3,791 female and 1,724 male students).

**Figure 5: Eastern region HEIs: numbers in part-time study by gender 2003/04**



(HESA Student Record, 2003/04)

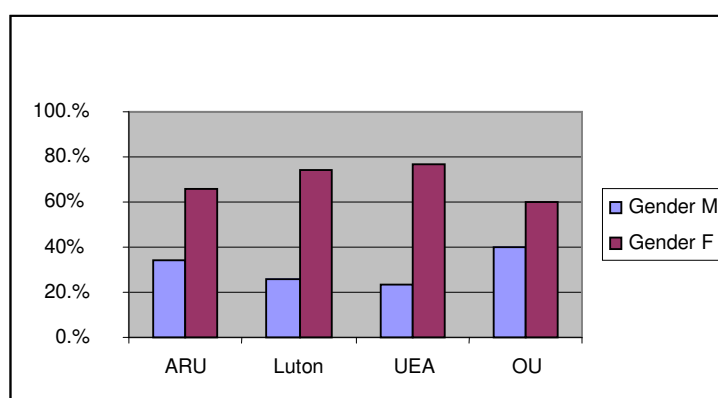
At undergraduate level, there was a greater gender difference amongst part-time than full-time students. At the national level: there were 174,040 full-time female and 146,250 full-time male students (a ratio of approximately 6:5) studying for a first degree; and there were 33,725 female and 18,825 male students (a ratio of 9:5) studying at ‘other’ undergraduate level.

At the regional level, the general picture of part-time study was the same in 2002/03, with women outnumbering men at every higher education institution and at almost every level of study. Overall, part-time study in the region and nationally is heavily favoured by women.

There are significant differences among the HEIs. A combination of data supplied by HESA and by the Open University for 2003/04 indicates that in all four of the HEIs that had taken part in our qualitative study, part-time undergraduate study attracted a greater proportion of women than men, and that the proportion varied among the four HEIs from 6 women out of every 10 students at the OU, to women accounting for more than three quarters of part-time students at UEA (figure 6, below).

In terms of the actual numbers of female and male part-time students, the Open University had the greatest numbers (with 12,490 women and 8,230 men) followed by Anglia Ruskin (with 6,836 women and 3,523 men). At the three ‘brick and mortar’ (i.e. campus-based) universities collaborating in our qualitative study, part-time study was more popular with women for every level of undergraduate study.

**Figure 6: Part-time undergraduate study at ARU, Luton, UEA and OU (Eastern region) by proportion of men and women**



(HESA Student Record, 2003/04; OU, 2003/04)

### Gender and subject

Looking across the region at part-time subjects that were particularly popular with women or with men in 2003/04, some divisions would appear to have been along traditional lines. ‘Subjects Allied to Medicine’ (with 8,883 female students and 1,396 male students) appealed much more to women than men, with courses in nursing being the major reason. Another group of subjects particularly popular with women was ‘Education’ (with 1,464 female students and 236 male students). Conversely, subject groups more popular with men were ‘Engineering and Technology’ (with 910 male students and 64 female students) and ‘Architecture’ (with 889 male students and 333 female students).



However, there were other subject groups where the gender balance suggests that any ideas about a traditional gender divide are mistaken or are in need of revision – at least insofar as part-time study is concerned. ‘Historical and Philosophical Studies’ for example, attracted many more women than men (3,228 female students and 1,732 male). ‘Computer Science’ had more part-time women overall (with 1,773 female students and 963 male) though it must be said that this was solely due to the number of women taking IT at Anglia Ruskin (1,626 in ‘other’ undergraduate courses). The subject group ‘Business and Administrative Studies’ seemed to appeal to men and women alike, with much the same numbers enrolled (1,000 female and 841 male students).

Yet again, though, we must note that these numbers are only from the HESA data. We have no regional statistics available for subject choice at the OU (although the relative freedom of choice enjoyed by OU students to pick and choose modules means that the major subject studied may only become apparent fairly late on in the course of study and so comparisons would not necessarily be easy).

Changes in the HESA data from the previous year (2002/03) are complex. For example, the number of men studying part-time ‘Nursing’ increased at every HEI in the region between 2002/03 and 2003/04 but the numbers remained small and changes in the proportion of men and women at the different HEIs were mixed over the two years. To give another example, ‘Business Studies’ (a major course in the ‘Business and Administrative Studies’ group) saw an increase in total part-time undergraduate enrolment from 721 students in 2002/03 to 881 in 2003/04 but these changes were played out differently by gender at each of the HEIs. Over all subjects, the regional change from 2002/03 showed little evidence of dominant trends in terms of gender.

## Summary

Part-time study is overwhelmingly favoured by women at every undergraduate level and this is, at least in part, because certain professions that make use of continuing professional development and/or accreditation through part-time study are still heavily favoured by women. Nursing is, perhaps, the most obvious example of this. In the field of education there is a trend towards increased accreditation through undergraduate courses for teaching assistants and in Early Years provision; and these, too, are professions that are traditionally favoured by women. At the national level, there has been significant growth in the popularity of part-time foundation degrees in Education Studies (QAA, 2005) and this may well increase future gender imbalances in part-time undergraduate study. However, from the limited evidence so far available, it appears that part-time study for foundation degrees is becoming more balanced in terms of gender (*op. cit.*). At the same time, we should recognise that part-time study gives women greater freedom to engage with higher education, and balance it with family responsibilities, than full-time study; and whilst the case studies indicate the limited extent to which it is ‘family friendly’ they also indicate that women are engaging in part-time study to progress in professions other than nursing and early years teaching.

## Age

The overall pattern of part-time undergraduate study by age across the region was one where more students were in their thirties (7,210) and forties (7,158) than in any other age bands – although there were also a relatively high number in their twenties (5,558). The indication is that part-time undergraduate study appeals most to people in the middle of their working lives and the inference that they are gaining and using qualifications which will be beneficial to current or future employment is borne out by the responses to our questionnaire and the national study by Universities UK (below). The statistically significant Universities UK study clearly indicates that, at the national level, most part-time students are motivated by their current employment rather than a shift in employment (2005, pp. 6-7).

As with other features of part-time undergraduate study, across the region there were institutional differences in the age profile:

**Figure 7: Numbers of part-time undergraduate students in regional HEIs by age**

	17 & Under	18-21	22-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60 & Over	Unknown
Anglia Ruskin University	96	1133	2352	2565	2652	1041	109	411
The University of Cambridge	2	21	81	211	379	764	2387	512
The University of East Anglia	2	42	568	1150	1259	729	514	38
The University of Essex	38	93	174	195	230	297	574	81
University of Hertfordshire	3	279	761	1157	1028	322	27	19
University of Luton	18	356	1243	1312	1055	335	47	0

(HESA Student Record, 2003/04)

These age profiles shed light on the large number of part-time students at the University of Cambridge where 72% of them were in their fifties and sixties and more than half the total were in their sixties. Coupled with the fact that at Cambridge these were all people engaged in ‘other’ undergraduate courses, the picture is one of study for personal pleasure rather than for work-related reasons. Elsewhere in the region, UEA and the University of Hertfordshire showed a profile of more mature students than the other institutions, with greater proportions of their part-time undergraduates in their forties and fifties and smaller proportions in their twenties.

These statistics from HESA are mirrored quite closely by the data from the OU in the East of England where out of a total of 20,720 undergraduates there were: 5,030 under the age of 29 (OU statistics in the younger age group are banded slightly differently to HESA); 7,220 in their thirties; and 5,170 in their forties. It is worth noting again here the significance of the numbers of Open University students. For example, there were more part-time undergraduates in their thirties studying through the OU in the East of England than in all the other HEIs put together (7,220 with the Open University compared to 6,590 at the other HEIs).

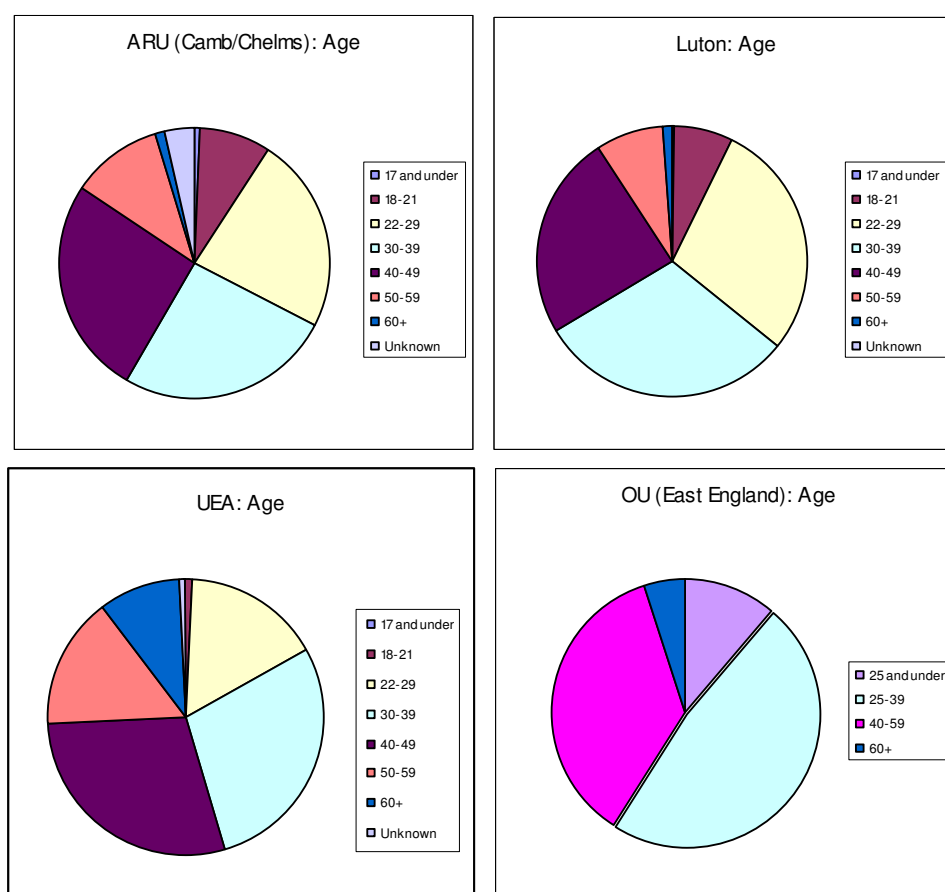
Across the four institutions participating in the qualitative study (Anglia Ruskin, the Universities of East Anglia and Luton and the Open University in the East of

England) part-time study was shown to be most attractive to people in their twenties and thirties (figure 8, below). At Luton University, for example, almost a third of all part-time undergraduates were aged between 30 and 39 and almost half the undergraduate students at the OU were between 25 and 39.

## Summary

Overall, the regional HESA data and the OU data for 2003/04 suggest a younger age profile than has previously been suggested elsewhere (e.g. Woodley, 2004). It seems significant and encouraging that people of an age to be carrying heavy employment and family responsibilities are choosing to engage in demanding levels of study. However, while part-time study may well be a condition of employment for some, and closely linked to current employment for many, this should not mask the personal as well as the professional rewards of part-time study; and these are addressed in the qualitative study, below.

**Figure 8: Part-time undergraduate students by age at ARU, Luton University, UEA and OU (Eastern region) 2003/04**



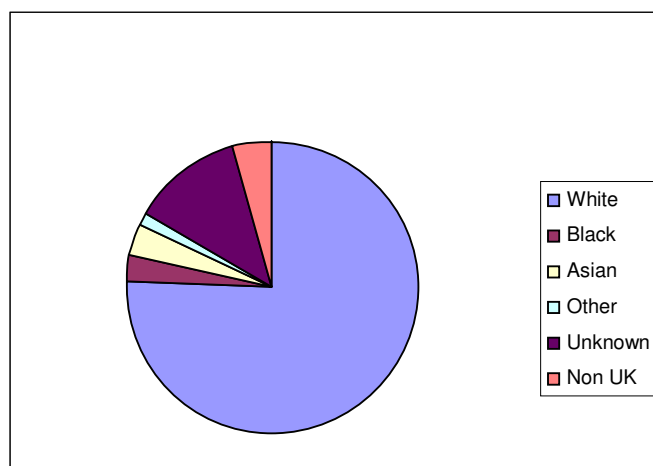
(HESA Student Record, 2003/04; OU, 2003/04)

## ***Ethnicity***

Across the Eastern region as a whole, the HESA data for 2003/04 shows that 76% of part-time students were White, 3% Black and 3% Asian (with the balance accounted for by non-UK students and the relatively large category of 'Unknown' students).

HESA data on ethnic representation at a national level gives a finer grained picture of ethnic minority participation in higher education than it does at the regional level. For example, the category 'Black' is broken down into 'Black British/Caribbean', 'Black British/African' and 'Other Black background'; and the Asian categories similarly acknowledge greater heterogeneity. Nonetheless, it would appear that the proportions of ethnic minorities in part-time higher education in the East of England broadly reflect the national picture (although the relatively large category of 'Unknown' at both regional and national levels) makes this a necessarily tentative claim.

**Figure 9: Eastern region: Part-time undergraduate study by ethnicity 2003/04**



(HESA Student Record, 2003/04)

Given the ethnic diversity of the East of England (or, rather, the lack of it in much of the region) it is inevitable that there were significant variations in ethnic representation across the HEIs. At the University of Hertfordshire, for example, which overlaps with the London commuter belt, the proportion of White part-time undergraduates was slightly lower in 2003/04 at 72% and the proportion of Black and Asian students significantly higher at 6% and 7% respectively.

The four universities involved in the qualitative study highlight the extent to which ethnic minority representation in part-time higher education varies across the region. The majority of part-time undergraduate students in each of these institutions were White, although the proportion varied from approximately two out of every three students at Luton to almost nine out of every ten at UEA.

**Figure 10: Ethnic Diversity at ARU, Luton, UEA and the OU (Eastern Region)**

	<b>ARU</b>	<b>Luton</b>	<b>UEA</b>	<b>OU</b>
<b>White</b>	82%	66.90%	88.20%	83%
<b>Black</b>	2.50%	6.20%	0.50%	1.80%
<b>Asian</b>	2.10%	8.45%	1.50%	1.70%
<b>Other</b>	1.25%	1.50%	0.86%	1.00%
<b>Unknown</b>	4.80%	2.10%	8.50%	12%
<b>Non-UK</b>	2.99%	14.60%	0.28%	N/A

(HESA Student Record, 2003/04; OU 2003/04)

Luton had a relatively high proportion of ethnic minority and foreign students with Black, Asian and non-UK students accounting for almost 30% of all part-time undergraduate students. By way of contrast: fewer than 8% of part-time students at Anglia Ruskin were Black, Asian or non-UK; and this figure dropped to less than 3% at UEA. In each instance, these figures articulated with the wider populations of ethnic minorities surrounding these different institutions. The total number of part-time Black students at the Open University in the East of England (380) was greater than at any of the other three HEIs; and there were comparable numbers of Asian students at the OU (350) as at Luton (369).

## **Summary**

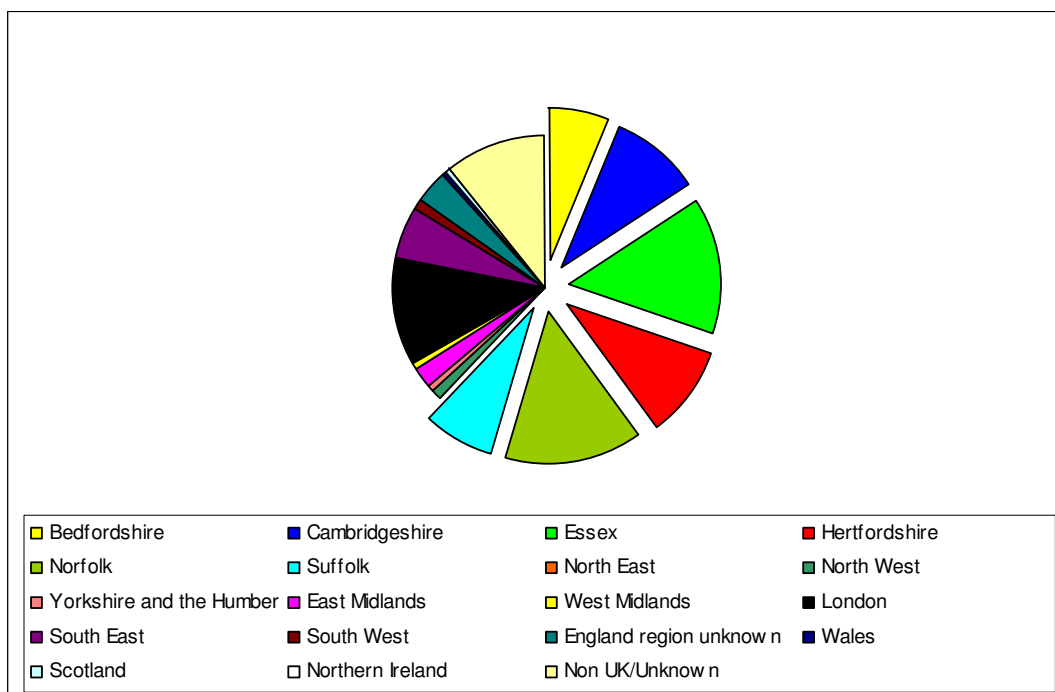
Increasing the representation of ethnic minorities in higher education is an issue central to the widening participation agenda. It may be significant that, in terms of part-time undergraduate study, the OU is attracting similar or greater numbers of ethnic minority students even when compared with those ‘brick and mortar’ universities in towns and cities in the region with a large multi-ethnic populations.

## ***Destination***

The **HESA Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) target population** contains all United Kingdom (UK) and European Union (EU) domiciled students reported to HESA for the reporting period 1 August to 31 July of the reporting period as obtaining relevant qualifications and whose study was full-time or part-time (including sandwich students and those writing-up theses). Awards from dormant status are not included in the target population. The coverage differs from the population used in previous years for the First Destination Supplement (FDS) in a number of ways. Notably, those who obtained any of the relevant qualifications following part-time study are now included, together with those obtaining postgraduate diplomas and certificates (full-time or part-time) (HESA Destinations of Leavers from HE, 2002/03, 2003/04).

HESA does not distinguish between undergraduate and postgraduate students when recording destinations – where students go and what they do when they have finished their course. Moreover, destination is only recorded once (after graduation) and so does not indicate a long-term commitment to a specific location.

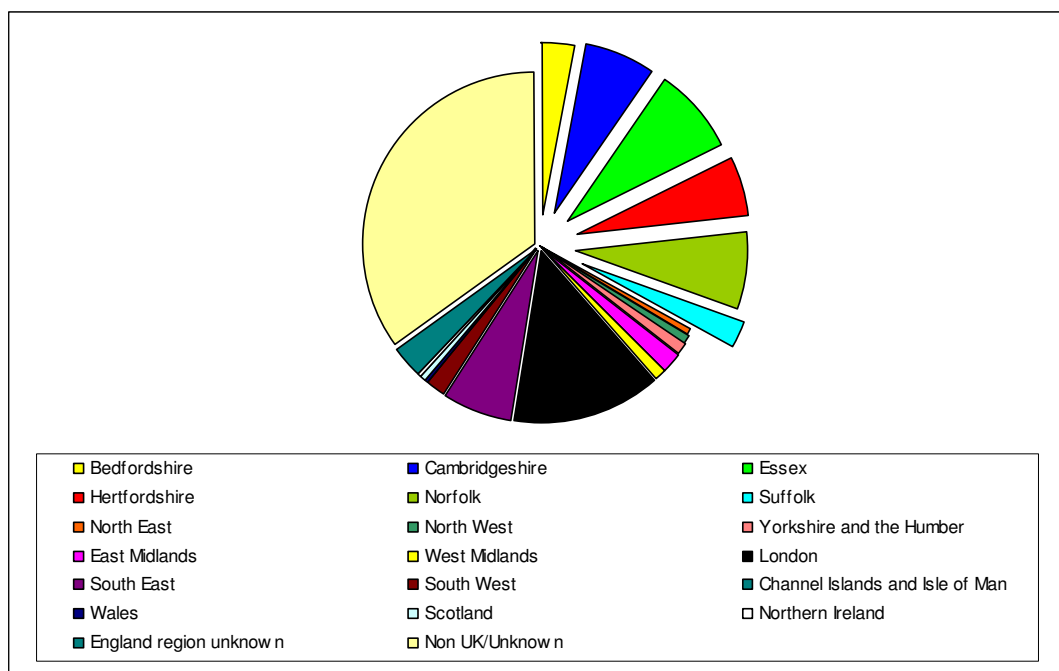
**Figure 11: Destinations of Eastern region part-time HE students**



Looking at the region as a whole in 2003/04, the destinations of 2,879 part-time students were recorded. More than half (62%) reported a specific destination within the East of England. Essex and Hertfordshire were major destinations as was Norfolk. 11% were destined for London and 6% elsewhere in the South East. By way of comparison, of the 14,673 graduates from full-time study in the region whose destination was recorded in 2003/04, only 33% recorded a destination within the East of England: 6% in Cambridgeshire, 7% Essex, 6% in Hertfordshire and 7% in Norfolk. 14 % went to London. However, it should be noted that 35% of these full-time students were non-UK or recorded no destination and this makes for greater uncertainty in analysing the data.

It is unsurprising that a greater proportion of graduates from part-time study record a regional destination than those graduating from full-time study: they are more likely to have already established family and/or working lives and, to that extent, have less mobility than their full-time peers. However, the destinations of graduating students vary across institutions and a closer analysis indicates the extent to which the mobility of part-time students articulates with mobility within, across and beyond the region.

**Figure 12: Destinations of Eastern region full-time HE students**



Among graduates from part-time study at the University of Hertfordshire, a significant proportion (32%) recorded Hertfordshire as their destination, a total of 43% recorded a destination within the East of England and a further 24% headed south across the county border to London. Here, though, the paucity of the available data becomes problematic: it is not possible to determine how many of those students were living in the county and working (or, given that many part-time students engage with higher education to enhance their current employment, continuing to work) in London. Nonetheless, the destination patterns differed considerably from those of the University of East Anglia where 68% of part-time students recorded their destination as Norfolk, a further 9% recorded neighbouring Suffolk and 84% stayed within the East of England.

Both institutions saw higher proportions of full-time graduates recording destinations beyond the region. At the University of Hertfordshire, where in 2003/04 there were 2,430 full-time leavers, 24% remained in Hertfordshire and 31% within the region. Of the 2,429 full-time students leaving UEA, 33% stayed in Norfolk and 46% within the region. Whilst it should be noted that both institutions had significant proportions of leavers with no known destination or who were non-UK (24% at Hertfordshire and 28% at UEA), it is clear that part-time students are far more likely to stay within the region. That likelihood is greater still at UEA where students already living and/or working in Norfolk are poorly served by transport infrastructures and therefore have less mobility – although there is a parallel interpretation relating to the county's overall quality of life.

Whatever the reason, part-time students are considerably less likely to export their higher level skills and knowledge beyond the region than full-time students.

## ***Summary***

In the region, part-time study is an extremely significant part of the overall provision of undergraduate higher education. However, the extent of this significance – with almost half of all undergraduates in the region and up to 30% of all those studying for a first degree in 2003/04 studying part-time – is obscured by the way in which statistics from the Open University are reported.

The HESA statistics indicate that most part-time study in the region is concentrated under the umbrella category of ‘other’ undergraduate courses. It may be slightly problematic to include OU data at particular levels of study, but if all OU undergraduate students with an ‘award intention’ are included in the overall statistics for part-time study towards a first degree, then almost one third of all part-time study in the region is for a first degree.

Part-time study is overwhelmingly favoured by women at every undergraduate level and this broadly reflects the national picture.

The age profile of part-time students is that of people under the age of forty, though there is some significant regional variation; and this suggests a younger age profile than that documented in some recent research (e.g. Woodley, 2004). Furthermore, a considerable proportion of part-time study is located within continuing education courses which typically attract older students. Although beyond the scope of this present study, and given the close links between part-time study and enhanced employment opportunities, it would be interesting to follow the age profile of part-time students over several years to see if there is a trend for it to fall.

Part of the rationale for supporting part-time undergraduate study in the region is the premise that part-time students are local and are likely to stay in the East of England once their studies are complete, thereby contributing to regional development. The overall pattern of destinations for students supports this premise, although only a very general picture is possible with the present data and there are marked variations among institutions which is worthy of further investigation.

Overall, there are significant variations in the extent to which institutions provide opportunities for part-time undergraduate study. These variations occur at particular levels of undergraduate study and in terms of the proportion that part-time students make of their total undergraduate populations. It appears from this, therefore, that there is variation in the importance that particular regional HEIs attach to part-time undergraduate study. The implications of this for the students are addressed below in the qualitative study.





## **An Overview of the Student Experience of Part-Time Study**

Questionnaires were sent out to some 3,750 part-time undergraduate students at six of the seven participating institutions (Suffolk College was unable to distribute them) inviting them to take part in the research. The intent was to elicit sufficient details of the students willing to participate in the research in order to ensure that those we invited to be interviewed represented the diversity of part-time students at the institutions and across the region. The responses to these questionnaires illustrate the wider contexts of the case studies.

In addition to requests for basic information, the questionnaires asked students to:

Please briefly explain:

1. why you chose your course
2. whether/in what ways the cost influenced your choice of course
3. any relevance your study has to current or future employment
4. why you chose to study part-time

Please:

5. list three advantages (in your opinion) of part-time study
6. list three disadvantages (in your opinion) of part-time study
7. add any further details or information you think we should know about

162 undergraduate students responded to at least one of these questions, often at length; and their responses not only served their purpose in allowing us to progressively focus on the selection of students for the in-depth interviews, they also generated a rich dataset offering interesting context to the detailed biographic case studies. As these 162 students represent less than 0.3% of the total part-time undergraduate body in the region, we make no claims to statistical significance here. Moreover, 93 of these students (or 57%) were studying with the Open University and their responses – particularly to the advantages and disadvantages of part-time study – tended to reflect the distance learning they were engaged in. Nonetheless, the responses touch upon the issues addressed in greater detail in the twelve case studies and they relate these issues to a wider range of students studying a wider range of subjects, thereby adding further validity to the case studies.

Here, having indicated the range of the respondents, we use their responses to the questionnaire to address:

- work and study;
- study and personal satisfaction;
- costs and funding; and
- part-time study as a balancing act.

## ***The Range of Respondents***

Of these 162 respondents:

- 120 are female, 41 male and no gender was indicated by one respondent;
- six self-identified as belonging to an ethnic minority group – here, Black Caribbean, Black African, Malaysian, Eurasian and Chinese; and
- 33 were studying foundation degree courses; 110 were studying honours degree courses; and 19 were studying other undergraduate courses (although with modular part-time study, particularly at the Open University, the definition of a ‘degree course’ for our analysis is based on the students’ intentions as well as on the nature of the particular course being followed).

The range of their occupations is indicated in the list below:

Student Social Worker	Building Site Manager
Care Manager (part-time)	Police Officer
Unemployed	Library Assistant
General Manager, Distribution Warehouse	PA (full-time)
Adult Literacy Tutor	Student Barrister
Teaching Assistant	Marine Engineer
PPI Assistant Mental Health Worker	Civil Servant
Clerk	Bridal Sales
Carer	Hypnotherapist
Boarding School Houseparent + F/T mother	Florist
Nature Reserve Site Manager	Carer
Auditor	Bank Manager
Driver	Housewife/Mother
ICT technician	Medical Practitioner
Health Visitor (part-time)	Property Manager
Army Engineer	Housewife
HM Prisoner	University Administrator
Occupational Therapist	Carer/Printer/Counsellor/Retired Architect
Associate Tissue Viability Nurse (full-time)	Director of a magazine publishing firm
Local Authority Administration Assistant	Teacher
Drug and Alcohol Worker	Industrial Temp/Factory Hand/Storeman
Unemployed/disabled	Tax Accountant

Though course titles and faculties vary among the institutions, the range of courses which the respondents were taking can be grouped as:

- Health related
- Social Work
- Counselling
- Psychology
- Business
- Technology
- Education
- Law
- Literature & Languages
- Humanities
- Natural Sciences
- Mathematics

## Coding the Responses

The responses to the seven questions in the questionnaire were retrospectively coded. The questions were open ones so theoretically any response was possible. All the responses to each question were initially analysed in order to reduce them to a manageable number of categories; and with each question it proved possible to create three or four discrete categories which accounted for all or almost all the responses to that question (not all students answered all the questions and so the total may be less than 162). The strength of the analysis depends on the argument that the responses cluster into highly identifiable categories and that these categories are meaningful ones. For example, with Question 1 (below) the four ways chosen to categorise the responses account for all 159 students who chose to answer this question:

Please briefly explain why you chose your course

	No of responses
1A work reasons	89
1B personal and fun	66
1C constrained by what is on offer	1
1D localness	3

## Work and Study

There was a strong relationship between the students' employment and their choice of degree:

- 89 of the 159 (56%) who responded to the first question explained that they had chosen their course for what could be described as work reasons;
- 30 of the 130 (23%) responding to the second question mentioned employer funding;
- 116 of the 145 (80%) responding to the third question saw their studies as relevant to their current or future employment; and
- 110 of the 162 (68%) respondents had chosen to study part-time because of work commitments.

The initial findings of the national Universities UK study of part-time higher education indicate that 61% of students studying for a first degree (that is, a foundation or honours degree) were motivated to do so for work-related reasons (Universities UK, 2005, pp. 6-7). Of these, 45% were studying for reasons related to their current career or job and 16% for reasons related to a change of career or job. Whilst we can attach no statistical significance to the responses to our questionnaire, there is a remarkably close correspondence between the 56% of students studying for work-related reasons in our study and UUK's national figure of 61%.

In our study, in some cases, the need for qualifications had been clearly spelled out by employers:

[I was] informed by previous employer that in order to progress from my previous role I needed a degree qualification.

My company chose the course for me as it's part of my advanced apprenticeship in business.

I chose to do this course as it is mandatory for my job as I have to mentor student nurses and post-registration nurses.

It was offered by my work as part of a human resources initiative for newly promoted middle managers.

In other cases, it was the students' own understanding of the need for qualifications that had led to the choice of course:

As a contractor, I felt I needed a technical degree to remain competitive in the labour market.

Because I lack the necessary work-based skills for management.

I specialise in challenging behaviour (with people with a learning disability) and am trained in Applied Behaviour Analysis. I need Cognitive Behaviour Therapy skills to enable me to offer a service to a wider range of clients.

Besides responses which made clear that qualifications were meeting an immediate need, there were also responses which indicated a longer term view, albeit one which was very much tied to the students' present employment. So, for example, study and qualifications were seen as important means of moving up the ladder at work:

For future employment I think that having a degree will allow me to apply for certain previously restricted jobs [and] also allow me access to further study opportunities.

I wanted to continue my education and this course fitted in with my work and helped improve my chances in getting promotion.

In some cases, students had chosen courses that would give them qualifications for a possible career-shift. For some, this may be connected to their present work:

I chose sociology as I was working in a home for the homeless at the time and it seemed relevant to work I was doing. When I changed my employment I continued because I have always wanted my degree and as I was already in the swing of it, it would be silly to change directions. Working for a local authority, sociology will still be handy for any future career move.

I chose this course because it offered the introduction to creative writing skills that I was looking for. It is indirectly relevant for my work, which offers some opportunities for creative writing. In fact, my employer, the RSPB, is paying for the course as part of a sabbatical package. After taking this and a related course with the OU, I will take 1 month out of my regular work and write articles for RSPB magazines.

For others, their study was linked to a change of career:

I chose my course because I love history and wanted a degree in it. As the course continued, I decided I wanted to teach history to adults.

I chose this course when it was drawn to my attention that I could continue in full-time employment and devise the content of the modules to suit my learning needs and workplace needs as I have computer skills for e-learning. It could pave the way to becoming a qualified teacher.

I was an engineer until I retired at the age of 60 when I decided to practice hypnotherapy. I realised my knowledge of Psychology was limited, so I enrolled for the Exploring Psychology course with the Open University.

I chose my course because it was a subject that interested me. My plan is to change my career when I leave the Army, so my study was a preparation for this career change.

Several of the students noted some form of personal benefit that was related to but clearly extended beyond their employment:

I chose to study for a law degree for two reasons. 1. to improve my career prospects and 2. to equip myself with legal skills to assist in personal challenges I was facing.

I chose to study psychology as it has been an area of long-term interest [but as] a college lecturer understanding of many psychological perspectives and theories underpins teaching practice.

I initially began to study with OU when my mother's health began to fail and I had to give up full-time employment to be a carer (the most soul destroying occupation). My first course was chosen to enable me to fight social services for mother's rights. When she died I changed direction and chose courses relating to the Romans for pleasure [and] now I am working again [my] KS2 pupils are enjoying the extras my studying brings to lessons.

### ***Study and Personal Satisfaction***

Of the 159 students responding to the first question, 66 of them (41.5%) had chosen their courses for personal satisfaction and pleasure. With the same caveat of the lack of statistical significance in this aspect of our study, this compares with a national figure of 30% of first degree students studying because of an interest in the subject matter (Universities UK, 2005, pp. 6-7). For those students in our study in or approaching retirement, part-time study allowed them to pursue an interest that they may not have been able to pursue during their working lives. For others, it appeared that interest and enjoyment were running in parallel with a very separate career (although there were suggestions that, in the long term, the study could prompt some kind of change):

I built up modular units following subjects of personal interest. I started with a history module, then moved to music deciding to gain a formal music qualification after years of playing the piano.

I wanted to learn Spanish and distance learning is more convenient than attending regular classes. There could possibly be an opportunity to use it in present/future employment but that was not why I chose to learn.

I've a life long interest in archaeology and I need to do something else other than nursing before I retire. I need to earn still so part-time is the only way I could study.

I chose the course because I find history magical and because it seemed good value for money and because I can write at night. Perhaps one day I will find an area I should prefer to specialise in.

I started off just wanting to find myself after my divorce. Now I really enjoy the learning. I will have hopefully better prospects and I'm doing this to prove to myself I can do it.

When I started the degree it was mainly for pleasure, to see if I was capable, or competent enough. But with the end in sight I have found myself looking at ways I can use it in future employment.

In some cases, particularly where students were suffering physical and/or mental ailments, a therapeutic benefit was claimed:

Studying with the OU has enabled me to fulfil my academic potential despite having some quite debilitating mental health and a few physical health problems. It gives me confidence and hope that when my health is sorted I can get straight into meaningful work again. It (study) has often been the only thing in my life that has been constant and kept me going. I was homeless for a while too, but holding on to the knowledge that I had something to aim for, kept me strong and hopeful.

Relief from pain – if I concentrate on studying, I am distracted from the pain, which caused me to retire from work in 1998.

### ***Costs and Funding***

For many students, part-time study made higher education viable. Of the 130 students who responded to the question of cost, 84 (65%) focussed on the affordability of part-time courses. This could be because they received some financial support from their employers, because the courses were seen as relatively inexpensive and/or because working while studying kept higher education within their financial means.

I chose to complete the degree part-time as I could not afford to give up full-time employment.

Wife, child and dog to support!

Cost was a definite factor both in terms of low cost modules and minimal loss of earnings whilst studying part-time.

If I had gone into full-time higher education it would have been far higher.

No choice! Could not afford to give up work and go to university.

I work full-time and am a single parent, I could not afford to take three years off work so decided to try studying part-time.

Need to earn still. Would rather study full-time but cannot. Part-time only option for study.

Sixteen of these 130 students (12%) were clearly self-funding and indicated the cost benefits of part-time study:

If the course had cost any more I would not have done it. This was the upper limit.

Cost of the course was fairly prohibitive but I was determined to finance myself.

Cost is a factor to me because I am a full-time carer of my 16 year old disabled daughter – I'm therefore not really able to fulfil my earnings potential. However, Open University courses can be paid for in instalments and I feel that investing in my personal development is probably good value for money in the long term.

Nationally, some 25% of students receive fee support (Universities UK, 2005, pp. 18-19). Of these, some 15% receive support from their employer, a further 7% receive support from the NHS/Department of Health and the remaining 3% are supported by other government departments and industry and commerce. Again, there is a close correlation between this national figure of 25% and the responses to our questionnaire with 30 students (23%) mentioning employer funding:

My company are paying for part of it though and if they weren't, I could not have afforded it.

My company sponsor my education in full.

I was initially sponsored by my employer until the final year of my course. I would have found it difficult to cover the costs personally. This is also a factor under consideration in terms of whether I will undertake further study programmes e.g. MSc.

The cost was important. The cost was moderate (£4.5k) and I approached my company to fund 50%, although if they had not offered this, I would have probably funded this myself. I have seen other courses of similar nature costing upwards of £20k.

Others, facing particular financial hardship, received assistance for their studies from their institution and/or the state:

Financially assisted by OU. As lone parent working part-time otherwise couldn't have done it.



Cost did not influence my decision to study, especially as I was awarded financial assistance.

Cost was a factor, but knowing I could get some support made the decision simpler.

### ***Part-Time Study as a Balancing Act***

Part-time provision enabled the students to balance their studies, with more or less ease, with their family and working lives. It should be remembered here that the majority of those responding to the questionnaire (57%) were studying with the Open University and therefore engaged in distance learning. As the case studies indicate, the experiences of those studying at other institutions could be very different.

Students were invited to comment on the advantages and disadvantages of part-time study. These were open questions and no prompts or options were offered. All the students responding to the questionnaires listed at least one advantage and disadvantage of part-time study; and the responses were often lengthy. The numbers here do not always match those above because the questionnaire was intended to give the students free rein to address issues they considered pertinent to part-time study and advantages and disadvantages were scattered throughout the responses. The specific responses to the question on advantages and disadvantages of part-time study were grouped into four broad categories, as follows:

- affordability (e.g. spread costs): 35 (22%)
  - better quality of study possible (e.g. time for reflection): 21 (13%)
  - practical application of study to work: 31 (19%)
  - flexibility (e.g. fit with family/work life): 117 (72%)
- 
- not enough time for study: 50 (31%)
  - isolation from peers and/or tutors: 89 (55%)
  - institution not geared to part-time study: 34 (21%)
  - detrimental to family/social relationships: 45 (28%)

The flexibility of part-time study was seen as a major advantage (although this was significantly biased towards the distance learning of the Open University students) and 117 of the students (72%) mentioned it. They valued part-time study because it meant they could study while continue supporting their families:

I am bringing 3 boys up myself working, keeping house. I haven't a lot of spare time. Part-time suits my individual needs.

At the time it wasn't financially viable for me to give up full-time employment, part-time studying allowed me to gain practical experience in the workplace to complement my studying. The advantages are flexibility, ability to study at a time to suit (own pace) and ability to manage a work/life balance.

I have two children and I am a single Mum, so this method of study fits around other demands on my time. The advantages are flexibility, if my

kids are ill or I have to work extra hours on a school project, I can shift my learning to another part of my day or week. Also, although it doesn't always feel like part-time, you do have some balance in your life and do not feel totally regimented by your studies.

However, trying to juggle part-time study with work and family and social lives was also difficult: 45 of the respondents (28%) saw their studies as detrimental to family and social relationships; and 50 (31%) said they did not have enough time to study:

Life balance is perhaps difficult – and to sustain concentration when the majority of work is completed at home. With so many other aspects of life to consider as well as study, this sometimes proves problematic. Many of my peers like me, have families – making it difficult to prioritize – everything is important and needs doing! Social life is non-existent!

I am just doing a timeline for my final year and wondering how I'm going to get time to sleep!

It inevitably means you have less spare time for other activities/relaxation.

The extra time spent 'working' means that you are more stretched at work, and you can be tired when tackling the course. It would be good to have the time to devote to the course, without having to break off to go to work.

Time. Time. Time, there just isn't enough! Sorry, that's all I can think of!

The flexibility the students referred to often manifested itself as being able to squeeze their studies around the rest of their lives. For those students engaged in distance learning, studying at home was often seen as an advantage that allowed for maximum flexibility:

I can choose when, where and for how long to study. I do not have to leave home and I can access the course at any time, day or night.

You can study when you want to. Resources are always available to you 24 hrs to fit in with a busy life. Support structure is very well established, because personnel running the courses understand that most have busy lives to fit study around.

However, whilst not being bound to full-time study offered flexibility within the constraints of busy lives, it also meant there were fewer opportunities for face-to-face interaction (whether in study or social situations) and this could be seen as a major disadvantage of part-time study (particularly, but not exclusively, for those on distance learning courses):

It's difficult to fit everything in, I sometimes feel isolated, and do not have as strong relationships with peers/ tutors.

Isolation in learning makes motivation difficult. I often feel if I were with like-minded people in a learning environment, it might be easier for us to

help each other keep up high levels of motivation. You form less student-to-student bonds than might occur in a full-time learning situation.

There is limited face to face interaction with fellow students/lecturers (mainly by phone/email). You need to be seriously self motivated to succeed in the course. No student social life!

It can make it less likely that the student can fully enter into the culture, ethos and opportunities of academic life.

## ***Summary***

As suggested above, the advantages and disadvantages of part-time study often mirror each other: the flexibility that means students can fit their studies around their family, social and work lives also require them to be incredibly organised; and whilst part-time study means they do not have to give up work, it also means that students may be left with little time for recreation and socialising (whether with their part-time peers or their wider circles of families and friends).

Yet it is clear that part-time study fulfils a variety of needs – particularly, but far from exclusively, the employment needs – of a wide range of people in the East of England. Although we cannot attribute statistical significance to our analyses of the responses to this questionnaire, those responses consistently articulate with the initial findings of the national study of part-time higher education carried out by Universities UK. Whilst acknowledging that these students are not necessarily representative of the total population of part-time undergraduate students in the region, the diversity of backgrounds, family circumstances, work and life situations sketched out in the responses to these questionnaires is remarkable; and they adumbrate the significant potential part-time higher education has to contribute to the economic and social development in the East of England:

I would only like to say that the benefits of studying for this degree are much greater than the end result of gaining a further qualification. The whole experience has had quite a profound effect on me and the way that I now live my life.

In the past two years I have experienced a roller coaster of emotions but I do not regret any of it. I have learnt to see every experience as a learning opportunity, which has had a tremendous effect on my working life. It seems that more doors are open than shut!

The issues raised in the responses to the questionnaire were explored further, and in greater contextual detail, in the interviews with individual part-time students.

## **The Student Experience of Part-Time Higher Education**

Twelve cases are presented here in order to illustrate the most salient issues arising from the qualitative research. These twelve students represent the diversity, although not the typicality, of students in part-time higher education in the East of England. Between them, they live and work across each of the six counties. Public and private sector workers are included, as well as the unemployed; and although all twelve of these students laid claim to working class backgrounds those in work are employed in a wide range of professions. The report deliberately excludes students in or approaching retirement, but the cases represent those in their twenties, thirties, forties and fifties. Some have family responsibilities, others are single; and we have included three single mothers here. Three of the students are from ethnic minority groups (although all three are Black and do not, therefore, represent the ethnic diversity of either the region or its part-time students).

Given our focus here on the links between part-time study and employment, we deliberately excluded those students in or approaching retirement from this report (although see Ogg, 2005 on the importance of part-time study for older members of society).

Given our intent to address the regional concern with social inclusion, we deliberately selected students who had come from what would traditionally have been described as working class backgrounds. Many, however, had become upwardly mobile and entered the middle classes through their employment (as well as through the engagement with higher education that is the focus of our study) and although obtaining reliable statistical information about the socio-economic status of students is highly problematic (e.g. Davies, 1997) when class is considered in terms of current employment, these students reflect the class status of those students who responded to our invitation to take part in this research. Moreover, the experiences of part-time higher education for the few participants coming from traditionally middle class backgrounds did not essentially differ from those of the students in the case studies: they also had to decide what courses to take at which institutions and then juggle their studies with their work and home commitments. By focusing on students who had been born into working class backgrounds, we are able to address the issues that are likely to influence the opportunities part-time study offers those people who would not otherwise progress to higher education.

The students represented here include two students from each of the universities (Graham, Heather, Richard, Beth, Hayley, Christine, Emily and Adam); one from each of the colleges (Kelly, Willard and Stephen); and one from the cohort of nurses (Harriet).

Seven of these students are female and five male. Three of them are from ethnic minorities (Kelly, Willard and Hayley). Three are in their twenties (Kelly, Harriet and Stephen), three in their thirties (Richard, Hayley and Christine), three in their forties (Graham, Beth and Emily) and three in their fifties (Heather, Willard and Adam).

Two of them were studying for foundation degrees (Willard and Stephen) and their courses were leading to degrees in the humanities, social sciences and business studies as well as professional qualifications.

We have followed the standard practice of biographic research and made each of these students anonymous in this report. As part of this process of safeguarding their identities, we intended to anonymise their institutions as well. This had a second purpose of focusing the research on the experience of part-time education rather than on the particular practices of institutions. However, it was impossible to disguise the Open University in these accounts.

Understanding the background of these students is important because it contextualises their expectations and experiences of part-time higher education and draws attention to its complexities. It also frames their reasons for not entering higher education at earlier stages of their lives and their subsequent reasons for choosing to study part-time now. When their social backgrounds, as well as their more recent circumstances, are taken into account it seems that, all too often, they have succeeded in spite of rather than because of the opportunities available to them. Part-time study was not always easy but it had given these students a 'second chance' to engage with higher education.

### ***Graham Jones: BSc, Construction Management***

I'm 40 years old and I was at the point in my life 8 or 9 years ago where I thought 'I'm on the tools, I'm a ganger in a civils ground working industry, I'm young enough to make a change and I don't necessarily want to stay out in the cold all my life'. I left school at 16 in 1981 with GCEs in Outdoor Activities, Physical Education and Science, Maths and English. I was much more interested in physical activity and I couldn't leave school quickly enough. It'd given me nothing of great benefit.

My father was a car park attendant for about 35 to 40 years, in other words for most of his working life 'til he retired. Neither he nor my mother talked about further education ever being possible for them. I have one brother who's 18 months older than me and who was much more academic. He went to sixth form college and then to the FE College where he stayed for 8 or 9 years and accumulated something like 27 qualifications: A Levels, certificates and so on. My opinion at the time was that he was just wasting himself. I couldn't understand why he would want to carry on because I thought everyone was unhappy at school. I just wanted to work and I went straight into the construction industry. The interviews then were 'Yeah, you look okay' and you didn't have to take any kind of test. I didn't like tests. I didn't do well in any kind of exams when I was at school.

So it was only after a 20 year break in my education it felt like the right time to go back, and I started at the local FE college. I did a 2 year BTEC GNVQ Advanced and honestly I just couldn't get enough of it. For me, it was filling in the missing gaps between the physical and the more theoretical and I was doing courses like surveying, law, construction methods and town planning. The 2 years went like *that*, and I came out with a distinction. The next step up was a 2 year HNC in the Built Environment and again, though it was a little bit more intense I couldn't get enough of it.

When I started the BTEC GNVQ Advanced I was working for a family firm. I'd worked for them for 15 and a half years and I really liked the company. And then I saw a job advertised on the notice board at the FE college as a site manager for another local firm, a major builders. They do contract builds for firms like Tesco or refurbishment of a Marks and Spencer. That was my first ever interview, one to one across a table, the suit and shirt, frightening as you like. When they rang up and said we want you to start, I feel I've never looked back.

I could see myself retiring in a site manager role. You might be 80% in the office, but it's on site and you see the utilities going in and the building going on all round you, and then when it's finished you drive away and you look in the rear view mirror and you think, 'I helped to build that'. But for the last four years I've been a sub agent managing transient sites. This new job is moving up the ladder but I don't like the work so much because it's repetitive and short-term and 70% of my time is in a central office. I think if I don't make a move again soon, I'll be losing touch with actual construction.

When I started the GNVQ, my then employer were happy for me to be going but they wouldn't subsidise me. Quite soon I realised that I didn't want my employers paying for any of my courses. Not that the money wouldn't be nice but I'm doing this all for me and my family. If I was relying on the firm then a day might come when they'd say, no you can't go to class because we're too busy. So when I started the BSc, I asked for a 4 day a week contract and that means the other day's my own. But you know, because of my qualifications and changes of job, my 4 day a week salary exceeds what I was originally working 7 days a week to earn.

And anyway, me and my partner talked this through at the beginning, and we have always said that it's a small sacrifice for a long term gain. My other expenses are that I've bought books, but I've bought them second-hand. I've got about 250 of them now though and I won't let them go. I've bought calculators and drawing boards but again second hand. With the drawing boards, I've used them for an assignment and once I've handed it in with all the drawings done properly, I've sold the boards on – because you know a full sized AO board with parallels, they're big. Travel could count as another expense. I've taken trips just for myself for my study. I might go down to the south coast to do some surveying and stay in a hotel and I've been to places like Maastricht in Holland to look at architecture.

One of the big reasons for wanting to come to this University was the location. When I was finishing at the FE college, they were asking which society do you want to be a member of, and there's the Royal one and then the Chartered Institute of Building, and I went 'Oh, the royal one I suppose'. And they said 'Well, that'll be Dartford then, the University of Greenwich' and obviously that's a lot further away. So I said, 'Well what's the difference then?' and they said 'Nothing'. So I decided it was just as good to come here and be in the Chartered Institute.

I'm in my final year now. I enrolled initially in the fast track honours degree but without knowing enough about what that necessitated. So I'm taking an extra year to finish. This year because I'm doing my honours it's a totally different structure. I have to write a dissertation, and so once my research methods paper is marked and

assuming it gets through, I should get a mentor. That would be six sessions a year with the mentor just to keep me on the straight and narrow. The dissertation is 8000 words and to me that doesn't sound a lot because the HNC dissertation I submitted was 12,000 words. When I was at the Institute everyone said that if I was graded on weight I would be getting double A pluses. If my research methods gets marked and it doesn't reach the standard I think I'll just forget the honours. I've reached a point where I've studied enough for a while.

My classes here at University for the previous three years were 1 day a week from 9 'til 6. That's quite a long time especially when you count the drive from where I live. And you know with the course I was doing at the FE college, I was doing 9am 'til 8pm 1 day a week, with an hour for lunch, so that's 10 hours in one day, and the full-time course was 13 hours spread over the whole week. The University day was four 2 hour classes and the three years covered about 20 subjects. There wasn't any choice in the modules. We have had some classes of maybe 100, but those of us in construction management, we've followed each other through. We took some classes with others though, so that would be full-time and part-time together. Sometimes I've felt a bit of a second class citizen here. There was one course where even though it was for the construction management students in the study guide, it was actually for building surveyors and all the course was directed at them, and we were just sitting there. With part-time students and full-time students there's also a general divide. Like on one course, I always sit in the first bay because I want to learn, but in one class behind me there was loads of noise and it was as though the full-time students just couldn't be bothered. And then one Christmas in class, there were just the eight of us and it was all the part-time students because the full-time students had decided to start holidays early. And the full-time students have got more time to study, and they've got time to socialise, you know 'sex and drugs and rock and roll'. I'd just like to go to a party or be offered some drugs. I don't want any but I'd just like to tick off that I've been offered some.

When I first got here I was pre-warned that the marking regime is different and that even if you got distinction in HNC, not to get disappointed when you get Cs. And it's happened to a certain extent; the marks have got lower. I don't ever dispute marks; the lecturers know what they're doing. But I sometimes think I can't study any more than I am now, I haven't got any more time. I spend 6 days studying, some times 30 hours a week. My first year here was the best year. It was the second year that was difficult. And the grades did drop off. And I had one lecturer. I'd done an assignment on research methods and you know when I do assignments I study everything. And I'd done it and I thought it was okay but when he gave it back he gave me a massive dressing down in front of the class and I couldn't believe it. It really affected me and I don't mind saying so, I felt like crying and I went straight out of the class to see the lecturer and I said I really felt like jacking it all in. And since then I've had that same lecturer for another course and I haven't enjoyed it at all, though I've kept up 100% attendance in 8 years. I never missed a class anywhere, because it's always been for myself and my family's well being.

I got into trouble with the library because it took ages to get my email account up and running. I got all these fines. You can take library books out some for 3 weeks but some for only 7 days. Now I just renew them online every week. But some of the fines I had I think the most expensive was £38 for two books – 50p a day I think.

When I finally got onto the email system, there were about 60 email messages with warnings about overdue library books so they'd done what they had to do in warning me but I hadn't actioned anything because I didn't know. I haven't ever told my partner about the size of those fines. She'd go spare.

I've been with my partner for 26 years. She initially went to college from school and did a 3 year catering course and then when she finished, it all came to a halt because if she carried on working in the food industry, she would have had to travel. But I was working and we were serious: we'd been together for 3 years. It has been a problem between the two of us. I'd come in, have my tea, do a bit with the kids before they go to bed, then I'd study 'til bedtime. It's been a sacrifice for her. She's a student widow. I've always said to her that she doesn't have to stay in, it's my choice. I have 2 children, my daughter is 15 and my son is 10 and with my kids I've always been a studying dad so they're used to it. We have a study room and it's got a desktop and a laptop and we have a spare hard drive with all our files and folder in separate spaces. When I'm driving in I look up and see if there's a light on and if there is I know Jenny my daughter's in there and if not, then I know I can use it straightaway. Along the way I've learnt all these ICT skills and now I use them all the time in work as well as in my study, and I'm passing them on to people I'm working with.

I've started thinking about maybe going somewhere abroad, emigrating when I've finished. Some friends of ours have gone to Australia and though I think the construction industry there is a bit different, I've got the qualification and it's the qualification that'll get me in, certainly not money because I haven't got any. But I also wouldn't rule out doing something else: I'd like to do a Masters degree before I die.

### ***Heather Price: BA, European Humanities***

I took my GCEs in 1970 and got 3 O Levels and 4 CSEs. I wasn't unhappy at school but I wasn't interested in staying on and in those days, you could walk straight into a job. What I wanted was to be a hairdresser – I think about it still – and I started the training and loved it but it was too little money and too long hours for my father. I had done basic typing at school and he marched me down to this office and I started office work. Then I started nursing training when I was 29.

I don't remember much about my mother because she left when I was six. I know she was a secretary and she came from a good family. My father came from a very ordinary working class background. He went to work in a drawing office and then he trained as a mechanical engineer. I've got a sister who's 10 years younger than me and very brainy. She stayed on at school to do A Levels and she got Physics and Chemistry. She wanted to be a physiotherapist but by the time she was ready to go to college she had met her husband. She trained as a cardiographer and now she does scanning of unborn babies.

I qualified as a State Enrolled Nurse after about two and half years training and I loved the work. But was 1983 and Thatcher was just crucifying the Health Service. Of 20 in my training group, only 4 got jobs at the end, so I began working as a travel rep



instead and went travelling for a year through Europe and ended up in Greece, which is where I met my husband. And we lived in London at first with his parents – and again they were ordinary people, his dad had worked round the country as a labourer and his mum stayed at home like my Nan as a housewife.

My husband has always worked as a service engineer to different companies, first at the post office as a telephone engineer and then for the railways for a time as a signals engineer and now for a telecoms company again, sometimes in the call centre answering queries, and sometimes out on the road installing phone systems or sorting out system failures etc. I worked as an agency nurse in London just before we moved here and I'd just got a place at Great Ormond Street Hospital to train as a prem babies nurse when I got pregnant with my daughter. We couldn't afford to buy a house in London and this was the only place we could go that it was possible. My husband was commuting down to London and we started having children so I couldn't work and I couldn't go out and study. He was out at about 6 in the morning and back late at night and then he'd have his dinner and go to bed. In a way it would have been easier if we'd stayed in London because he had a family circle who would have helped. So by the time my youngest son was 3 and had just started nursery, I decided 'my brain's dying I've got to do something'. My nursing qualification had lapsed and so I decided to start the OU.

I have three children. My eldest son is going to Sheffield Hallam next year. He's taking a year out and right now is looking for work. My daughter trained as a beauty therapist. She's wanted to do that since she was 12 but she's just had to give it up because she started getting terrible eczema. My youngest is just about to take GCSEs. He can't wait to leave school, not because he doesn't want to carry on with education but because he wants to do it somewhere different. The local FE college is good and I think much more supportive than the school.

I did an access course through the National Extension College in 1992. It was a correspondence course and I did the work and sent it off to be marked. It didn't seem like a lot to take on, and I remember doing it through the summer months. I started the OU degree in 1993, so it's taken me more than 10 years to complete. I've kept my options open and been able to create the degree course I wanted, starting with a Victorian interdisciplinary course, then 'Third World Development', 'World Religions', 'Cities and Technology' and 'The Enlightenment and 'Cinema and Society' which was looking at films of the 1950s and 1960s. I've always believed in choosing topics which would be of interest and I did manage to get a humanities named degree in the end. I did space out the modules as well. I had to have an operation and that meant one year out, and then three years ago, I took another year out to do a holistics course. I got enough credits for my Ordinary degree two years ago and decided I wanted Honours, so for my last course I did 'The Renaissance', but I failed it, which was a shock, but I did it again last year and got it last October. I would like to do a Masters sometime in something like 'Popular Culture'. It's that combination of history and literature that really interests me.

When the children were smaller, I honestly found it easier to study. When they've grown up and they're at home it's much more difficult. It was the standard seven essays per module, some of them were 1500-2000 words and some of 4000 words, and of course there was a dissertation at the fourth level. The written exams were

always for 3 hours. I loved it all; I loved writing. Like I said, I've realised I like using my brain. I took all the exams at the regional college here. I did all the study at home, usually on the kitchen table, though by the time the children were growing up, we were all competing for the computer and for table space. Sometimes the study only worked for me if I was in the sitting room with all books spread out on the floor and they were with the computer in the kitchen. And when it came to writing my dissertation, we have a caravan sitting on the driveway all summer so I spent the whole summer sitting in there with the door closed.

When I first started studying with the OU there were also summer schools, especially for first level courses. They weren't that local but I found them an invaluable experience. There was a choice of when during the summer you could go and usually several places in the country offering the course at the same time. So there would be people coming down from Scotland say or coming in from abroad, perhaps 100 people together for a whole week. You went on Saturday morning with the first lecture after lunch and they finished on Friday afternoon. They didn't seem expensive either. Perhaps I was lucky because my husband has always had a company car so he would take me, and I suppose the cost did rise over time but they always seemed pretty good value for money. The student budget account has also always helped. I would pay in £20 or £30 a month and that spread the cost of everything. Mind you the costs are going up now.

We had tutorials once a month and the tutorials for the Bachelors degree were almost always about 40 miles away and it really depended on the course whether they were good or bad. I've sat in tutorials where there were only 4 of us and in others where there were 20 and not enough chairs. Back at the beginning, the first level course tutorials were held locally here every week, and that was really helpful. We went round to each other's houses to do study groups as well, and had study trips out which were of interest to us and which we arranged for ourselves. But going on to the second level and up, it seemed that the higher you get, the more competitive it gets and the less people help each other. I was told by one man 'It's supposed to be distance learning and you're supposed to do it by yourself'. But I've always really enjoyed meeting and discussion – not that I need help. But I enjoy it, it helps to bounce ideas off other people.

I did get very involved with the OU student association at the beginning as well. There was a local branch here and we would meet once a month and sort out any local issues and student concerns, and if there were enough people in a branch, you could fund socials. We did things like go up to the park in the summer and have barbecues. I also went to conferences and repped at the summer schools, for instance with making sure the students were alright, organising evening entertainment like quiz nights and karaoke or discos and I would sell OU products during the day.

I would like to go into teaching. I went to college last summer and did a City and Guilds in 'delivering learning' so that I can teach at post 16 level. That would be what I would really like. I like that age because people are there because they want to be there. I'd like to teach the access courses or subjects like A Level Sociology and History. My other ambition would be to go into some type of Art administration. But there are so few jobs around here and if I'm not careful, I'll be back in an office typing. I need to pay for my son to go to Uni. One problem is that I don't drive and

here there's a lot of work on the edge of the city. In the centre itself, it's full of shops and little offices. But it takes 20-25 minutes to get into town from where we live and then another bus to get anywhere else. Or it's 45 minutes on the train to get anywhere else. You know, I used to commute for my nursing training and it was almost an hour each way. You're done for at the end of the week.

I do wish I could have done my degree at a proper university and had more contact with students and tutors. I also wish I'd had access to a proper academic library, instead of trailing up to the local library and them not having what I need. My husband and family have always supported me. I think they're proud of me and the way I've done it. It's funny but while I was at a tutorial a little while ago, the tutor said, 'We're all academics now, aren't we' and I thought 'No, not really, I don't think of myself as an academic, even though I suppose I might be now, I'm just an ordinary person'.

### ***Kelly Thompson: BA, Interior Design***

I'm doing a part-time degree in Interior Design and it's basically training me to be an interior designer who is actually going to go and do interior design. It gives you every aspect that you need and that's very helpful. The only thing, probably, for me is it's tough because I have to juggle everything with looking after my children. I'm a single mum with two boys. One is six and the other is two. So, as well as trying to get my college work and my homework done, which is a lot, it is quite difficult trying to juggle that with looking after my children.

I left school when I was sixteen. My GCSEs were okay but we were having family problems and so it was quite difficult for me and instead of having my mind on my work, I had my mind elsewhere half the time. Then I moved here and then I got pregnant with my first son. I got a place through the housing association but we moved around quite a bit. I was working as well. For about a year I worked in just a clothes shop and worked in a bar as well. But I knew I wanted to do something that I could make something of, something that I'd really want to do. I knew that if I went back to college and got better exams I'd have better job opportunities. So I went back to college and did some GCSEs again because I really didn't want to go and work in clothes shops and do menial jobs. It wasn't for me. That's why I'm doing this course now. I want to be a project manager doing interior design.

I came to one of the open days here to see what I could do because I was looking at Interior Design and Health and Beauty. I thought I'd get into Health and Beauty and they accepted me very quickly. But I didn't think I'd get into the Interior Design. Not for the degree. I mean, I thought you needed A levels and things like that and I don't have any A levels. But I went and spoke to one of the tutors and felt a bit more positive about doing it. Whereas before, I thought it would be something I wouldn't be able to do. I thought I'd like to do it but wouldn't be able to do it. You see, when you are at home with two kids, then it's like your brain isn't actually working. It was the interview that made me more positive. Basically, they managed to break it down and explain it and it didn't seem like it was something I can't do because I don't have A levels. He actually said 'Well, give it a try.' It was actually quite good they were willing to just see what I could do because I had to prove myself. I suppose it was

like they wanted to see what I could do, to see if I could do it. It was like a probation period. I didn't have to do an exam or anything like that so, basically, I went from doing my GCSEs to doing a degree. We talked about loads of things and then he told me about what the course would contain and I thought 'Yeah, I could do that.'

I'm enjoying the study but I would like to be able to come in and actually be tutored more because I don't feel that I am being tutored. For me, there's a lot of 'We'll give you the basics but you go out and expand on them.' I'd like to be tutored a bit more, you know 'This is how things are done, blah, blah, blah.' If I could, I'd probably be in every day. The part-time course is four and a half years. It would be three years if it was full-time. I come in to college two days a week. It's from 9.30am to 3.20pm. If you are full-time, then you come in a third day. I can manage it doing part-time. But I think with full-time, even though there's only one extra day, I think it would be just that little bit too much. You're supposed to do as much work in your own time as you do at college. So being part-time actually means doing four days every week and if I was full-time it would actually mean six days.

There are probably other ways you can do interior design without getting a degree, but it's the only way that I can see myself getting there. It's very difficult for people to actually get into the interior design industry anywhere. And I have two children and that makes it even more difficult. For one project I had to go and interview an interior designer in a big company in London and that was one of the questions I actually asked her, you know about children. She said it's difficult if you've got children because you've got to travel and sometimes you've got to be willing to work for pennies and that way you can work your way up. I can't afford to do that so this is the only way, doing the degree, that I can see will get me into interior design. Because that shows them what I can do. It shows them that I'm an interior designer. I mean, I knew it wasn't easy before I started, but it was really, really useful for me to talk to that woman and to find out from her what it's actually like. But I'm still going to do it because this is what I want to do now.

You know, doing this course, doing a degree, it gives me the skills to be an interior designer. I wouldn't want to do just a foundation course, which is basically painting and decorating from what I see. I didn't take myself to college to do that, whereas the degree does give you a lot of the skills that you need. This will help me get a job in interior design and I actually don't know how else I could do it. But I don't just see it as a degree. I'm doing it for the enjoyment of it rather than to get a degree. People that I know, friends and stuff from school, they're like 'I'm doing a degree in law' or something. I don't see it like that. I just say to people 'I'm going to college to do a course.' I think that if you are actually into it and you really want to do it, you wouldn't be talking about it just as just a degree. And even when I get my degree, I'd still have to show that I can do the work. You know, it's important to me because I want to do interior design. I want to do something that I enjoy. I don't want to go back to working in a shop.

I do go out sometimes with the other students on the course. Sometimes we talk about work and sometimes we go for a drink and we don't talk about college work. I would like to do after college activities, like dance classes and things like that. Before, when I was at school, I was very much into dance and athletics and I was very good at that. It was worthwhile doing and I would like to be able to do it again. But I

am not able to because of the cost. And I would need to pay for child care if I wanted to go out in the evening for things like that.

With being Black, the college is pretty mixed and I would say the course is evenly mixed as well. There's three of us, one in each year of the course, who are Black and I'm one of them. It is an issue sometimes and I've had problems with particular people. But the thing is, I grew up in the middle of Brixton and I've had it just about as hard as anybody else had it. I've had it harder than a lot of people have had it. But I don't want to say 'It's because I'm Black' and use that as an excuse. I've not chosen to go down that road.

I don't know if I could do this degree if the college wasn't here and if it didn't do the course. I don't know where I could go to study because of the transport. I mean, when I finish, I have to go and get my son from school and that will take me forty-five minutes because I can get one bus but I will be walking for half an hour. I don't have my own transport and that's something else that has to come out of your living expenses. I did think about the Open University but there's only certain courses you can do. I did look at one ages ago, before I started doing interior design. I looked at doing finances and, being a practical subject, you could do a lot of it at home but then you had to go away and stay there and I couldn't afford to do that. And the thing is, my children are very demanding and they are always needing mummy to do something. So I am never left alone to sit down and have my own time so I wouldn't do an Open University course. I just wouldn't get anything done.

It's difficult to work at home. I've got a computer at home and internet access. You need it. You absolutely need it. It isn't because the course is based on the internet because it isn't. You need it for doing research, for looking things up. If I didn't have the internet, I'd be struggling because I have to get information and there's only so much you can find out from the library. At the moment, I'm doing something on Virgin Airlines and in the library at the college there's isn't anything at all. I try to do my work at the college but if I do work at home, I sort of do it on the dining room table. I mean, I get in and I'm doing the dinner and I do a little bit of work but then you have to run off again and it's 'Mum, mum, mum' and it's constant. In the last semester, my children drew all over my work, so I can't have anything lying around. Everything has to be in its place and I can't work when it gets too late. If I'm going to get any sort of work done, I need to do it when they go to bed. But then I get so tired and I fall asleep. Like, the other day, I was doing the ironing and I just fell asleep while I was doing it. I know you are supposed to do equal amounts of work at home, but I don't. I'd like to come in to college more often to work but I'm not able to. I just have to try and do what I can get done whilst I am here. I mean, I do do extra work at home but I tend to find myself doing more like an hour when I can. Or if they are asleep, I'll grab my books and sort of try and get something done. But they are both very active so I don't get a lot of time.

I'm on income support but if I was working, it would be impossible to juggle everything. And I would be working almost to pay off the child care which wouldn't actually pay off all the child care. It would just pay some of it. I'd be working to pay for the child care that I'd need because I was working. It's a vicious circle. I get the fees paid for because I'm on income support but it's not easy and there are still money worries. Because this is a practical course, there are things you need to buy, like I

need to get certain pens to do something. Last semester, when we had to do a design for a shop, the colour that I actually wanted use on the scheme, I didn't have it. So I had to totally change what I was doing and do it another colour to fit in with what I had got. I needed specific pens for what I'd planned but they are like £3 each and I can't afford those and you get a crappy result. My youngest goes to nursery at the college which is actually £31 per day. So I normally turn to the Access to Learning Fund at the college but I'm not able to do that this year so I've had a bill already for £300 and something pounds and I have no way of paying because they've run out of money and can't pay for it. So I have had to find some way of getting a loan to pay for it because I can't not have a place for him to go to nursery.

I don't know, actually, how I'm going to cope. I'm worrying about money all the time, you know. You spend a lot of time on the phone, you get sent round houses, you spend a lot of the time on the phone whacking up your phone bill. I have got in contact with the LEA. The LEA are not helpful. But the college are helpful with information about where I should go. They say it would be better for me to go full-time because then I don't have to pay for the nursery fees if I'm full-time. I have spoken to my tutor and she suggests I can go full-time. But I don't know if I can do it. I haven't figured that out yet. I'll have to sit down and figure it out. But there's no way that I'm going to stop. I'm not doing that. No, there's no way I'm going to quit. I'll have to find some way of paying for this. I mean, they are making it as difficult as possible but I'll have to do whatever I can to finish it. Because it's all I can see myself doing. I don't want to go back and work in a shop. There's no point in doing something if you have no interest in it. I want to stick with this and I don't want to be dropping out of things all of the time so I want to actually finish. Can I go somewhere with it or not? If you drop out, you can't go anywhere.

### ***Richard Smith: LLB Law***

My partner is a lecturer at the university here. His brother's a judge and his sister's a doctor so the family has lots of experience of higher education. My Mum and Dad had no experience of higher education. My dad worked for a number of years as a lorry driver until they left the area and had since had a succession of manual jobs. He really would have liked to do something in farming and agriculture, but he understood that on that kind of pay, you couldn't raise a family, so he never got to do what he wanted. My mum worked for a while but gave up when she was expecting me and was at home for us when we were young. When my brother was five or six she started work at the local school, first as a dinner lady and finally ending up as a full-time welfare assistant to disabled children. I have just the one brother. He left school with no qualifications – I think that's right – and has had a succession of jobs. He tends to walk off a job if there's something he doesn't like: he'd sooner have no money and be happy. He's working as a roofing contractor now – that general line of work.

I left school in 1983 when I was 16. I think I was quite bright when I was young and I remember my parents being told that I could easily do the 11+ and go to the local grammar school. But the promise in the town was of a dream comprehensive school, with a golf course, a swimming pool, and horseriding and so on and so that's where I went. Of course, the dream school never materialised, and I got into a crowd of people who were not that interested in working. I ended up with 5 CSEs and 2 O Levels, and

I instantly realised I'd messed up. But I never really thought about staying on or retaking anything. All my mates were leaving and I was interested in money; the idea of £25 a week in your pocket was very appealing. So I did 6 months on YTS training scheme and hated it.

I started work in the warehouse of a local printing firm on a job that had been advertised on the board of the YTS. I didn't dislike it but I hadn't chosen it. I moved here simply as a result of someone I knew leaving the print firm and getting a job here and then getting an application form for me. I was still living at home at the time and I remember my parents being keen because it was a good job. And really here's where I've found my feet. We're a major telecoms company and I've worked here for 18 years now and I've had a succession of different jobs. It's a big organisation and it allows you to do that. I've not exactly had a straight line career progression because some of them have been interesting sideways moves. But the general trend has always been upwards.

At present I'm a quality auditor. But next month, I will also be involved in environmental auditing, whether we're using energy efficiently and its impact on the environment. I think career structures have changed over the last twenty years. There was much more of a structure at the lower end, when I joined the company but once you get into management, it's different. I did want qualifications and it became more difficult. I remember when I moved into Personnel, there was a course through the Institute of Personnel Development and it was a good qualification for management. But the rule was you had to be a manager to go on it so it was a bit of a vicious circle.

I did some GCSEs in at the local college when I was still living at home in the late 1980s: English and Sociology first of all in '86 to '87 and then I started A Level Law in '91. But I was in the middle of that when I moved over here and there wasn't anywhere near here doing the course, so I wasn't able to finish it. My interest in Law had been kindled when I first moved into Personnel. My job was preparing information for company solicitors. Nowadays you'd probably do it all mechanically or online, but in those days you had to find out information by hand.

I did an Access course at the local college in 1998 and originally thought of doing psychology at University, because one of the course tutors had said to me 'You'd be good at that'. But I decided in the end that I was being guided into something again rather than it being anything I really wanted to do. So I thought in the end no, it's Law that I want to do. There didn't seem to be any problem with getting in here. I don't think the Access course harmed my application but I don't remember there being many questions about qualifications. It seemed more a question of the money than anything else! The company has a scheme called 'pound for pound' for its employees and pays for half my costs. That covers books as well as fees, which is good because Law books start at about £30. It hasn't felt too bad, especially as I'm paying per term and it all goes on my credit card. My parents said if I needed a hand they would help out with money

And we just started. We didn't have any kind of an induction course and just turned up to the first class. We have had some very good courses, where the teaching has been really relevant, and some where it's felt like the tutor is just reading out the notes from the year before, and you think 'You could have emailed me those and I needn't

have bothered fighting my way through the traffic'. It would have been good to have had some study support. It's been good having a group together and I've enjoyed that feeling of general group support in the classes.

Many of us have come through non-traditional routes and we've all got stories to tell of what it's like to try and get the opportunity for higher education. Sophia is a classmate in the year ahead and she works as a secretary for a major oil company in London. Her company are now really supportive, but she tells the story when she first worked there of a meeting where her boss was talking about spending the training budget and went round the table and asked the whole team what they wanted to do, and people were saying 'A course on presentation skills' or 'Marketing'. But he didn't ask her. So she took him aside afterward and said 'I want to do A Level law' and his jaw dropped. But they sponsored her for it and are now paying for her to do the Law degree. Fatima is another one. She says she only applied the week before the course started and only found out about it by absolute chance even though she's attending her local university. It seems a lost opportunity when you see how far people are prepared to come even in this one class. She works in the NHS locally and you would think the local university would be interested in joint initiatives with the NHS because the NHS does lots of in house training and development.

But though we're friendly, it hasn't extended into a study group. People live too far apart and so it just wouldn't work. I'm in my third year and it is a very select course in terms of numbers. Though it's hard to say because the years were all mixed together, I think there were about six people started in my year. But we're down to three from my year now and six altogether now and ours is the last year. The course is closed down and it's just winding down.

Other things that could help in the University would be to have basic catering facilities available – the drinks machine often isn't working for Christ's sake. But this is indicative I think. There's not much consideration of part-timers. To give you one example, I have to go and register for next year and I can't do it at any other time than during the day. So I have to go all the way over there tomorrow afternoon on the off chance of seeing my tutor and getting him to sign off my papers. Theoretically you can get to see a tutor in the evening but there's never any guarantee that one would be there. Another thing is we take classes in the evening and they've scheduled them right next to the Students Union. So you get the disco thumping through the wall.

I study mostly at home. I can do so in the afternoon when I'm working from home because my partner has a 9 to 5 job. I also travel around a lot, sometimes two or three days a week, and I do a lot of reading on trains. So I tend to do the reading like that and the writing at home. There's a bit of tension with my partner as to how this works and he tends to use the study upstairs and I use the dining room table. I have a laptop with a modem which links into our network for free, and he has broadband upstairs. I tend to spread my books around, which again sometimes cause a bit of problem because I make quite a lot of mess. But in general, he's very supportive. The fact that he knows how much work I ought to be doing means that he sometimes is getting on at me to do some work. But it also means that if I feel I have to drop everything and study, then he understands, and helps me to organise it. He also helps me directly with revision, with question and answer sessions for exam preparation.



My plans with my degree are about becoming a solicitor. There's a course I can do through Birmingham to get my Legal Practice Certificate, which is the one day a month type of part-time course. That costs a lot of money though – maybe £3-4000 a year. The long term plan is definitely to use my degree to become part of the legal team here. You can apply to the company to become a trainee and in my company it's only open to internal candidates. They won't accept you as a trainee until you're on the course, so I imagine I'd have to fund the first terms' fees, but then they will share the costs, and they would pay me the same salary as I'm getting now. My dream job would be to be the legal on the environmental team – the legal services environmental group solicitor - but that's a question of the post becoming available. That doesn't happen very often.

### ***Willard Fletcher: FD, Business and IT***

I work as an IT trainer for the local borough council, I run the service desk and take calls, as well as providing computer training for people who work for the council. The training is almost all in Microsoft Office programmes and I've been doing the job for five years, since 2000. Prior to that, I was doing something very different. I was an engineer and I'd worked in engineering all my life.

I was born in the West Indies and it was in 1964/65 that my family moved here. I left school at 16 in 1969 with no qualifications, no GCEs or whatever it was in those days. I wasn't at all interested in staying on or doing anything more in education. But that was my choice. My parents didn't dictate to any of us. My elder brother, who's 2 years older, went on from school to university. He did A levels and then went to Reading University to study Law, and then I have a younger brother, 5 years younger, and he went on to Nottingham University to do Business. So there's lots of higher education in my family. I had the example of my brother studying very hard at university so I'd got no reason not to have gone on if I'd wanted to. And I enjoyed school but I always wanted to do things with my hands. My parents had no experience of university, though. They both left school and went straight into work.

There has always been racial discrimination in the city though – since the time I arrived here at the age of 13. This was an issue when we were growing up because my parents did not understand the system and did not want us to fight back. For example, my older brother was told by his teacher he was not good enough to go to university, even though he was top in the class. Then there's been the constant issue of having to accept jobs that we're over qualified for and still having to prove ourselves more than others have to. As brothers, we always feel that our life time achievements were down to our parents hard work and determination and not the education system

So there was always work. You could just walk into a craft based job locally in the 1970s and there was a choice. Apprenticeships were really easy to get. I trained first as a sheet metal worker and then in machine tool setting, and I took City and Guilds exams in both of those, Part 1 and Part 2. Machine tool setting was a better trade and I became bored with sheet metal work and I was good at my job, so the company sponsored me for a second apprenticeship. Altogether it was about 5 years of apprenticeship and then another 2 years training. Part of it was through day release at the local Technical College. Apprenticeship was a really low wage but at least you

were getting paid to be trained. Machine tool setting was a much better environment than sheet metal work, but then that was as far as you could go. I stayed in the company altogether for 13 years and I had made it to a certain tier, but at the end I was still an ordinary man working as a machine tool setter. The second company I worked for, I was mainly doing machine type work again. I was then promoted to team leader and a team was made up of 7 operators, 2 setters and the team leader who was always a senior setter. My job was to coordinate the team, making sure stocks and tooling were in place for the production run. But I don't think I would have been promoted any further up the management structure because of the culture in the company. People with degrees and other qualifications would be targeting the next level as a starting point. I stayed there for 13 or 14 years, but during that time working in manufacturing was getting a little bit dire. You know locally there used to be major manufacturing companies, but gradually jobs were getting less and less and the pay was not so great. And I saw the future in the service industries.

IT was becoming an interest of mine and I started doing IT courses at night school. They were all Microsoft approved short courses – and what I found was that the courses were easy and I was very good at IT. I wasn't sponsored by anyone; I was funding it all myself. And finally I got the opportunity to move into a new kind of work when I got the job at the borough council in IT. And I've got lots of experience in IT, but only those basic qualifications in Microsoft. So that's the interest in doing the foundation degree. When you do a job in IT, you've got to be seen to be as good as the people you're working with.

I found out about courses on the Internet. And it had to be part-time – in the evening. It was two nights a week for the first two years and its one night a week this year and the classes run from 6.15-9.30 at night. The travel from home can take half an hour, or you can get caught up in traffic and it can take much longer. I've had three exams so far and the rest have been assignments, including one work based project last year, which took up a whole semester. I'd rather do assignments. I can do them in my own time. Doing exams again was really hard: it was years since I'd taken one. Even worse – the first exam I took here was on quantitative methods and I don't like mathematics. But I did enough to get through. The assignments are written over four to six weeks and are anywhere between 2000 and 5000 words. I'd never written something that length before in my life. So at the beginning it was a bit of a nightmare but you struggle through and then it starts to get easier.

I think there is good study support available if you ask for it. The college could put a little bit more in place and advertise it more, and you are left on your own until you say you need something. But I suppose if you're a little bit shy, then it's going to be difficult. With the students, I've sent emails around about the assignments but I think I'm the only one. All our assignments are individual ones so it's not as if we work together as a group. I don't see the others outside of class. We only see each other at the college – we all live in different parts of the county. At the end of the semester and after an exam we'll go out and have a beer but apart from that, no. People are leaving straight from work to here and then at 9.30 they want to get home. My group started out at about 30 and now it's down to about 4. It's difficult to know exactly what's happened to all of them. Some of it's natural. The course starts as an HNC, so people can do that and disappear, and then they can also disappear after the HND. That was a factor for me when I was choosing the course because I knew if I got fed

up I could hop off. In a typical evening session now, we'll be joined by another set of Business students so we'll be about 10 altogether. There's a wide variety of ages, from eighteen year olds all the way up. I'm the oldest at 55 and most of the class are in their 30s. Most of the tutors are younger than me. It doesn't bother me at all. But if there are any issues it's to do with age – not anything like background or race I think. Some of these young kids don't even remember to switch off their mobile phones. It's about how seriously they take it.

I worry a bit about some of the facilities at the college. There's enough computers and I can also get a PC when I want one in the library but the chairs in the IT rooms are the worst I've seen. I don't think Health and Safety would pass them. Generally, the teaching can sometimes be good and sometimes not. It's a bit all over the place. I work as a trainer so I suppose I'm always going to be critical because it's what I do myself. But for me, there's no point in just putting up a Power Point presentation and sitting back and looking at it running through and then everyone going home. There needs to be some active teaching to see what people have learnt. And sometimes I think because everyone's tired they're just glad to sit through it.

I want to do things properly. It's the same with assignments. Some people will look at presentations and make a few notes and then that's it, but that's not the way for me. And I think the tutors here know that I take it very seriously and they are prepared to go out of their way. They know I'm funding myself – I've done that all the way through. I approached my employers to see if they would support me and they just weren't interested. So it's £130 a module and that means it's £2000 already. I also buy my own books, it saves me time. And if they're IT books, then I think maybe that I can use them as work. But you might only have 30 minutes and you have to make best use of it. And so spending lots of time trying to get hold of books doesn't seem like a good idea. I do use the local library and I know that I could use the local university library if I need to.

I do my studying when I can. Nine tenths of my study is at home though I sometimes manage to do bits at lunchtime. I have a computer at home of course. I also have a 17 year old daughter who is studying Business and IT and will be going to Nottingham University as a full-time student later this year. We talk to each other about the subjects, but sometimes I think she wants me to do her work for her. Actually I think sometimes my wife can give her more help than me. She did a full-time engineering degree at Leeds University straight from school.

So I'm coming to the end of the course and I don't know what I'll do next. I want to go on to do a Bachelors degree but I'll need a break because I've got to fund it myself. But the other problem is that it would have to be full-time if I go on – there isn't any part-time. What I might be able to do is to transfer credits to the university where I live and see what's available there part-time. It might mean changing course and doing something other than Business. I've got to find out what's possible really. But I'll miss it in September. I've always got to be doing something. I'm not getting the qualification because of it leading to a new job or promotion or anything like that. I have no problem with age discrimination in my current employment and I know that my previous qualifications were the main deciding factor in getting the post. But for me, I think that I'm in my ideal job right now. I want to stay as an IT trainer. It's more that nowadays you need academic qualifications as well as hands on skills. I think it's

also brought out a lot more confidence in me. And humans are funny. The people who I work with know exactly what I'm doing and the attitude now is, 'At least he knows what he's talking about', even though I'm talking about exactly what I was talking about four years ago. But people now say, 'Go and see him, he's going to college, he knows what he's doing'.

### ***Beth Ashington: BA, Business Management***

I'm 42 and I work as a bid manager for a major company which on this site deals with radar systems. My job is to bring together the technical, commercial, and engineering parts of a bid including the cost pricing, and then to get the whole proposal vetted and approved so that hopefully the company wins the business. Ideally, you do that one proposal at a time, but it never works like that, it's all or nothing. Like buses, they all come along at once. For example, now until the end of April, I need to split myself in half because there are too many pulls on my time and I've been flagged officially as a resource concern because of my workload. I started the degree three years ago and only had to do three years because I already had an HNC. I did the HNC 20 years ago, and at that time you couldn't go on to take a part-time degree. It's much more flexible now. When I started the degree I was a commercial officer working at another site with this company, and in order to progress any further I was told I needed further qualifications. So that was the reason for a Business degree.

My father has been a farm worker all his life except for a couple of years in the Merchant Navy. He hated every minute of school. Mum left school with a leaving certificate, and Dad always said Mum was cleverer. We're very local and Dad still lives in the house where we grew up in. I went to the local mixed comprehensive school there. I left school as 16 with 5 GCEs and some CSEs, and didn't have a thought of staying on. I went straight from school to work for a major company and I stayed there for 5 years. I worked the whole time in the 'Overseas Contracts' department, starting off as a contracts assistant and ending as a senior contracts officer. For four of those years, I was doing the HNC part-time at the local college. I knew when I left school that I wanted to get more qualifications and I wrote to all the big companies in the area to see what they offered. So I did two years for an ONC in Business Studies, and then the HNC in Business and Finance and they were both half a day a week day release. They didn't directly lead into promotion but they definitely helped. There was a proper career path there, and if I'd stayed longer then, I would have made more progress. The class was full of people from the company because they paid for it. It was almost all 19 and 20 year olds. I remember though there was one older woman and I think about her looking back and I wished we'd included her more. I don't mean that we were nasty or anything but we didn't invite her to join in.

At 21, I felt the grass was greener elsewhere, and I worked for several other companies. I went to live in South London and did one training course while I was there through the London Chamber of Commerce. I'd met my husband by then and I worked until I had a break for my children. And then we moved here, where my husband's family come from, and when my children were a little grown up, I worked for the County Council for a while.

I've two daughters, one's now 16 and one 13. The elder one has decided to stay on at school which I'm really pleased about. It's been her own choice and that makes a real difference I think. I didn't want it to seem like she was pushed into it. She's come up with the idea of Business as something that will always be useful. The younger one won't start choosing GCSE options 'til next year and it's too early to tell really what she wants to do. I'm now divorced, but very happily divorced in 1997, and I have been living with a new partner since 2001. We feel very settled here. My children were born here and they have their schools and their friends. I don't think I could bring myself to wrench them away from all their friends, though it has crossed my mind once or twice to go back to be closer to my dad.

I came to work for this company in 2001 and after having been told about needing the extra qualifications, I actually found out about the course at the local university by accident. There happened to be a brochure on somebody's desk and I flicked through it. For me, it was a priority for it to be local. If I had had to travel far I wouldn't have done it I don't think. It had to be on my doorstep. I got approval from the company and that means that they pay all the fees, and they give me half a day off a week to actually attend the classes. They don't pay for books though, and my work is not actually covered while I'm in class. I don't think that's possible really. The classes run from 1pm until 7pm on a Thursday afternoon, so yes, that means there's more to do on Friday morning.

When I started the course in 2003, it was the first time that I'd done any kind of studying in 20 years and I found the first year a real struggle and I let everybody know it. I complained constantly, I must have driven everyone mad. I couldn't get my mind into that academic mind set; it's so different to work life. I used to get such a headache. My mind would wander and then I'd panic, I'd be really worried that I'd missed something. I needed practice to opening my brain to absorbing all that information. I've taken three modules each semester and it's one and a half hours of taught session on each per week. Everything else, you do in your own time, and it has been difficult sometimes to find the discipline. I think also the kind of job I do, we're used to doing everything at the last minute, that's how the bid process works with the pressure of a deadline. Someone said to me recently, 'We're adrenalin junkies, aren't we.' And it's true.

But also, it was a pity that there was no kind of 'how to study' course at the beginning. There have been a couple of modules such as 'Research Skills' and 'Developing a Personal Action Plan' but these only happened two thirds of the way through the course. On the whole, the support has not been directly from the university but from other students. Lots of people have dropped out, which is a pity, but that means that we're down to about nine, which is a small group and close knit. We email each other and support each other in classes – 'Did you understand that or was that me having a thick moment?' We send each other the notes from class. We meet up for a meal once or twice a term. The camaraderie just happened. The majority of us are in our late 30s and early 40s so we're an older group of 3 men and 6 women and being more experienced really helps I think. It also means that we've actually applied ideas in practice. In fact we talk about some of the young lecturers – we call them 'professional academics' – as being too theoretical and too idealistic, and we know that some of the situations they are talking about simply wouldn't happen in our

work situations. I think maybe that was another difficulty, having to write about something that I was thinking just isn't so.

I do use the library. My workplace is really close to the campus so I can go at the end of work and pick up books. However I do like the digital library as well. It has business databases, journal articles and so on, and I can use it from home – that is when my children aren't on the computer. I study at home in what I call a cupboard, which I share with the tumble dryer. It's actually a brick shed and it has a desk and a PC and all my books. I tell everyone 'I'm going to my office' and it's very quiet. There is another computer in the lounge and that's the one that has Internet access. We're going to network both of them eventually but we haven't cracked it yet. However, in some ways it's easier to work at work. For example I brought my dissertation work in on Monday and stayed behind the end of the day. The thing is when I'm at work, I've got my work hat on and that means I can focus on study. But when I get home from work, I've got my domestic hat on and I transition somewhere in the car – like Superman – and I'm thinking 'Who needs sports gear? Who needs delivering somewhere? What's happening this evening?' and so on. So I can stay out of hours after work here, though it would be difficult to do that at the weekend because of security. However I can go into the university at the weekend.

I know education shouldn't be like this but if you're doing part-time, you have such a short period of time, everything has to be focused. There was one particular example of that not working, in a management accounting module. It began badly because the tutor was poorly, so instead of getting someone else in, they cut the course down to 10 weeks. And then the tutor set some work and left us to get on with it and when we did it was nothing to do with either an assignment or an exam. And honestly if it's not, don't bother teaching it. We only have an hour and a half a week and it's precious. That particular instance ended with correspondence with the Dean and Assistant Dean, and it was nothing to do with the tutor, who's a lovely man. But we're professional at what we do and we expect the same standard from the university. I think all in all, with the experience of the degree, half of me feels really negative. But perhaps it's like having children; you just have to do it again because you forget how bad it was. But most of the time I do still feel that if someone said to me, 'How about doing an MBA?' I think I might have to punch them on the nose.

My children have been brilliant all the time I've been studying and my new partner has pushed and cajoled me all the way. To give you an example of just how supportive he's been, I had to create a Business website for an assignment and I spent all over Christmas setting it up. My partner helped me because he is just very patient and very good with the technical side while I tend to get frustrated and walk away. Anyway, we finished the day before, and part of the assignment was that you had to launch the website and then send a letter to the tutor telling him the URL address. We couldn't launch it. We were up 'til 1am the day before the deadline, and nothing. So on the Monday morning, I was getting ready for work and thinking through all the contingencies, trying to find time during the day for one last attempt, letting the tutor know it hadn't worked, retaking the assignment and so on, then I went to say goodbye to my partner – he starts work later – and he was sitting at the computer in the lounge and he just said, 'There it goes – page up, links in place' and I just burst into tears. You could not believe how relieved I was. I got a B for it and I was very happy.

## ***Hayley Swanston: BA, Child and Adolescent Studies***

I'm 36 and I was born on the Broadwater Farm Estate when it was nice and new. I have 2 elder sisters, one's much older, she had her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday in December 2005 and 3 brothers and I'm the baby of the family. My mum had me when she was 40 so that's like a double generation gap. My 50 year old sister is brilliant and has done short courses at different universities, including Oxford and Cambridge. My other sister didn't seem academic but she found out she's dyslexic and she's now just finished a diploma in Social Work. My 3 brothers all left school as soon as they could: one works in the post office and one works in health and safety and one emigrated and we've lost touch a bit. He went there before my elder son was born – he's never met either of my children. I wonder whether there's a male/female divide with my brothers; may be there was an idea in the family that they'd do the more handy, physical thing. My mum had been an auxiliary nurse and then she and my dad worked together and then my dad was self employed and ran a painting and decorating business in London. He got all my brothers involved in his decorating business because he said it was important that they should have a trade to fall back. I remember crying because I said 'I want to come. I want to know how to do painting and decorating', but he wouldn't let me go with them.

I moved to Jamaica with my mum when I was 7 and came back when I was 14. But I'm an adaptable kind person and I loved it. I came back to an all-girls school in Hackney, a very mixed school: White, Black and Asian, with no one group bigger than any other. I took GCSEs the first year that they came out. I felt a bit of a guinea pig because it seemed like they were just sorting them out. After GCSEs I stayed on for sixth form; I didn't want to move into another new environment and go to college. I wanted to be an engineer at that time but I'd failed Physics GCSE so I was re-taking it and doing Physics, and English Literature at A Level. I didn't do very much, just enjoyed being top of the school and not wearing uniform. The sixth form was mixed and by then boys were a real distraction for me. I remember just having a mixed common room and we were allowed to have music and it got to be where I thought 'If I don't turn up to class, who cares?' I left without taking A levels.

I worked in local council offices in London for three or four years and I left to do the Access to Social Sciences course as a route to become a social worker. But by the time I was accepted I had decided I didn't want to be a social worker. I'd discovered an interest in counselling. But there wasn't a degree course available locally so I went on to do sociology and psychology at London Guildhall. When I started the access course, I'd just split up with my partner, Jerome's dad. So I started with a bit of stress. And I had childcare to think about. But it was actually a lot easier than I thought. I got Jerome into the college crèche and one of his aunts worked there, so she made sure he was okay. It meant that I could just leave him. When I started at University it was more of a struggle because I couldn't get him into a school near to where I lived. But his other aunt worked in a school in Stoke Newington and she got him into the nursery just a few days before his third birthday so if ever there was a problem with classes and so on, she would just take care of him. And my brother's family lived round the corner from the school so when he was older there were many days when I would just ring up and say 'Can you get him for me?' It's been much more difficult with my younger son because I don't have that kind of circle here.

At Guildhall, I was obviously going into university as an older student and there were a group of us who had done the access course together so we stuck pretty much together. That was a mixed group of different backgrounds. There were one or two Irish women I remember. So I was insulated in that first year I think, socialising with the same people I'd done the access course with and it was only in the second year that I realised I was a fish out of water and that it was just the wrong course for me. I escaped from Guildhall into doing a Certificate in Mentoring as part of my first mentoring job in London, one day a week part-time.

I moved here three years ago, which was mostly about finding somewhere decent to live. We were living in a two bedroom third floor flat in London. And for a while my mum was living with us and so she had my room, and then she and my dad were both staying with us until he went back to Jamaica, so I was sharing the other room the boys. I had a friend who had moved up here and so I came to look and I liked the look of the place. I still do. People say hello and it feels safe and friendly, and no-one is trying to rip you off.

I found the course at the local university by surfing the net. A lot of people I know are still quite scared of computers but I use mine at home all the time. I find it very useful being able to do things over the Internet. So I found details of the course online and I knew it was exactly the kind of course I want to do. I'm doing two modules per semester which means two lectures and two seminars a week. It's not a problem fitting in the hours at the university. I work on the night shift in a care home in a town close by. I've done that for about 2 years; and I also started as a part-time social work assistant. On nights, I finish at 8am and I have only one day when I have to be there at 9pm. The main thing is I say 'Right I need to be out of here at 8 o'clock', so if somebody hasn't turned up I have to say 'I'm really sorry but I can't wait for them to turn up'. And with my other job I fit it around whatever I'm doing so I can just say 'I can't do that, I've got to get to lectures'.

I chose the university because it's local and convenient and its offering the course I want. I've found I can study there – the facilities are good. The induction course was good and gave people social space to meet. But the picture of what part-time study was like was painted very rosily. I got the impression that I could fit my study to suit my work but the reality was more like 'Hurry up and sign up for the group you want to be in and if you're very lucky you'll get it'. I imagined that I could be at university only on a Monday but that wasn't the case.

The money aspect of the course is a huge problem though at the moment. I have student debts still from my previous study and this means that I have difficulty in borrowing money to pay the fees at the due time. I started the course in September and couldn't get the finances sorted out quickly enough. By November your official access gets cut off. There's not really much flexibility in how you pay the fees. Well, not for my kind of course. At the moment, I can't officially attend classes or take exams until the bill is paid. More importantly, work I've already done may not count towards my grades – like the assignments I've done and the exams in January. The Finance Office is working on the problem but it's still not sorted out and it's now February. So that's a real problem. I've had two assignments back so far and I've done really well on them I got an A and an A-. I couldn't believe it; I was stunned. Apparently they're going to use my assignments as models for next year. My sister,



the one who has been doing the social work diploma always says to me ‘You’re the brainbox’ but I don’t feel like that. And the danger is that everyone assumes that if you’ve done it once you can do it again, so if I don’t everyone will assume I’m slacking.

The university doesn’t have much to offer socially for older students. The social scene seems to be all about young people. Don’t get me wrong I like going out but drinking and late nights are not for me. I don’t smoke or drink. I would like some socialising which is about family and where people with children felt welcome. I think some kind of family fun days would be good. I was elected as rep for the mature students and I think there is growing realisation that things need to change. I socialise in class with my group but I don’t see them outside. The way the course is set up, I’ll lose contact with many in the group because they are full-time and will go on to take different modules. So maybe there’s also a need for specifically part-time student groups – social groups so part-time student can be encouraged to do more socially as well as teaching, so there’s some continuity in the classes.

I’m going to be studying for four or five years and I might have to carry on doing the same sort of work that I’m doing now, so that I can complete it. But I am hoping to use my degree as a sort of bargaining point beforehand. But if not, then as I’m finishing, I think I’d be applying for supervisory roles and in the meantime getting the experience so that I can balance that out and say look I’ve got lots of work experience as well as the university. My dream job isn’t out there at the moment or it’s not at managerial level. It’s mentoring and counselling and working with schools to develop strategies in raising emotional literacy throughout the school.

### ***Christine Harker: BA, Philosophy***

I’m 37 now and I work full-time as an office manager. I come from a fairly working class family, middle child of three with an older sister, younger brother. My father was a maintenance engineer for Birdseye for about 45 years and my mother was a home help, looking after the elderly. My brother is an architect now and my sister is an accountant but they both worked into the job, if you see what I mean. My brother didn’t go and do an architect degree. He worked up to become one and my sister’s the same. She didn’t do an accountancy degree. They worked into the job. University education was never on offer. No-one ever said ‘No’ – it was just never part of the deal. I do remember that one of my boyfriend’s brothers was at university and I remember thinking how fantastic to do that. But it wasn’t the done thing, not at all, not with my family or friends.

I had a fairly unexciting academic education. I was kind of middle of the road, just went through on a C average and came out with 5 O Levels and that was about it really. All my friends were from working class families and none of them had ever talked about carrying on with education. Continuing your education was going to an FE College and getting yourself a career but university, higher education was never talked about as an option. It wasn’t that you couldn’t go, it was just not on the board. So I decided to become a nursery nurse. I like working with children and trained as a nursery nurse. I was 16 so I went there and trained, left at eighteen and got a normal

nursery nurse sort of job appointment. I had other jobs as well and then, by the time I was 24, I was a single mother.

It all got a bit messy and life got tough. My parents didn't want to help and so it was a very tough time for us because I did feel very alone and life was fairly grim for me. It's a strange sort of life which people on benefits live because it's just about existing. You're on a very, very low income, an amazingly low income, and if you're a single parent, the fact that you are on a very, very low income restricts what you can do just physically. It restricts where you can go. I didn't have a car and I couldn't afford the bus fare to go places and what that meant was that you wouldn't see people for days on end and in the evening I'd go to lock my front door and I hadn't unlocked it because I hadn't been out all day. So you'd spend days and days not seeing anybody.

I realised that I needed to do something about it. I needed to be able to think again because I wasn't thinking. And so I contacted the local university and that would have been 13 years ago. My friends were telling me to retrain so I could get a job. But I needed a job where I'd be earning enough money to pay for the childcare I'd need if I was going to work and just working in Sainsbury's wasn't going to do it. It sounds a bit odd but I wrote this in my essay last week. At the time, Michelle in *Eastenders* was a single parent and went to university and so I was thinking it must be possible to get a grant and to get benefits to go through university and that surely someone's going to let you do that otherwise they wouldn't have put it on television as there would have been uproar. I contacted the local university and they were having an open evening so a friend drove me up there and one other friend came and babysat. But it all came down to the fact that you couldn't get a grant and keep your benefits. You could have one or the other but you couldn't have both and there was no way to get childcare paid for. It was all kind of stacked up against me and unless I was going to ring Social Services to get my son, Neil, adopted there wasn't much of a way round it, really. So I kind of knocked it on the head.

I decided to do something more practical and I went to learn to type and to turn on a computer. I did all these free courses at the local college when Neil was in school and then my boss, my boss as is he now, contacted the college and said he needed a PA and did they have anyone that could help him. They asked me if I would go and I became his PA. I suppose I had the equivalent of a diploma in word processing by then. It was a very basic kind of PA job but his business, which is management development business training, has really grown. I started work for him part-time which meant I could drop Neil off at school and pick him up which was essential, really, in the early days. Then I started working full-time which meant I could afford childcare for the hour or so I needed it after school which worked out quite well. I moved from being a PA to managing the business and then I employed someone because it just got a bit mad and nine years later there are seven administrators and I'm running it all on a day to day basis.

My boss, Ben, is very keen on personal development planning. He's paying for me to study which is quite an incentive to do this. I did a diploma in management because I thought I should have some qualifications relevant to what I do. But I found it very boring. It didn't make me think at all. For example, I'd have to write an essay on financial planning but that's an every day thing that I do working on budgets and profit and loss. I just did it but I didn't get anything out of it and by the end of it I

didn't feel I'd moved anywhere at all. Then, when I finished it, Ben said 'What do you want to do next?' I thought he was going to say 'Have a couple of years off' or he was going to suggest an MBA – which I wasn't interested in after doing the diploma. But when he asked what I was going to do next I said 'Well, I've always wanted to do a degree' and he said I should see what I could do at the local university. It didn't have to be anything to do with work, just something that interested me. Why did I want to do a degree? I thought I'd never been given the opportunity to do it and I always thought that I could. And it was a personal challenge. I wanted to prove that I could do it, to prove to the kind of people throughout your life who have given you the impression that you actually weren't up to it.

So I picked up the prospectus and went through it page by page and kind of narrowed it down. I wanted something that would interest me and was going to be useful in the long term. It had to be part-time and I tried to find an evening course so that it wouldn't mess with work. But it was very obvious from the very beginning that it was just not going to happen – and that was a bit of a shock. I went through and read quite a lot but it was the philosophy that seemed the most interesting. It seemed even more interesting after I'd looked at the other part-time courses. But I wasn't sure that I could do it because a lot of it was about the meaning of life and religion and all those kind of things and I was thinking 'Blimey, that's going to be quite heavy.' So I rang the Philosophy department and went to see them and we talked about the degree and then I asked the crunch question: 'Do I need to go away and do an access course to get on?' And because I'd just completed the diploma and I'd been used to writing essays they actually offered me a place there and then. Which was quite nice, really. Then I went back to Ben and explained it was part-time but during the day and that was a bit of a moment, really, because then we had to make a decision about what it really meant. Especially as he's paying for it. We both knew it was going to take some work and that was his point really. He was happy to release me from work but he wanted to know that I could still do my job.

And that's the crux of the problem. I do two modules each semester which is essentially two lectures and a seminar for each module a week which is six hours per week plus all the other reading that goes along with that. At the moment, I have to go in on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays. I have become quite cute about which subjects I choose depending on which slot they're in to try and group my subjects into certain days of the week and I've also become very friendly with the administrator. I would turn up at registration day not knowing what the timetable would be until then and not knowing when I should be around for the next twelve weeks would be a bit of a nightmare. So I have become quite friendly with the administrator who has been able to give me some idea – with no guarantees – about what the timetable will be. The timetable is a bit of a pain. For instance, I have a lecture from 11.00 to 12 noon on a Monday and then nothing until 2.00 to 3.00. So I could go back to work, which will essentially get me back to work for about forty-five minutes before I have to come back again and the parking is horrendous. And that's just one day. I get into work at seven in the morning and most days I get out about 5.30 p.m. so I make up most of the hours. But you can't replace the train of thought. So, I'll be working on something and suddenly think 'Oh my God, it's 10 o'clock!' You get in the car and race in, you've fought for a parking space and trying to park is a nightmare. For mature students who are trying to balance a job with getting to university, the Park and Ride is not an option for me at all. I can't afford to lose half an hour. It would be

cheaper to pay the fine for being clamped. You've run into the lecture and you're sweating because you're late. You sit down and you've got to concentrate for an hour and then you think 'Oh, I've got a meeting!' You run back to the car park, get in the car, you can't get out of town, you race to the meeting and you sit down and you think 'Right, now think because this is not philosophy, this is serious.' And at the moment, I've got two hours and then I've got to get back in the car, go back to the university, park, get into the lecture and think about it and then what I end up doing is I don't think about the stuff I am doing at the university. I concentrate for that hour and then I lose it afterwards. I completely lose it out of my head as I drive back to work and then when I get back home and I open the books, then I think about it and reflect on what they have said and learn it. I don't have the ability to try and do that straight away because I have to get back to work and do something normal.

I've learnt how to get in the car and leave the philosophy in the book and I have got very good at making really, really comprehensive notes so that I can prompt myself. And I've got no shame – I'll send the lecturers emails and say 'Really sorry, but this one went right past me, just run that by me again because I don't understand that.' What I do is, every semester, the very first week I am there, I drop them all an email and say 'Hi, I'm working full-time and doing a part-time degree and I'm a single parent. I'm really busy, I may not make every one of your lectures and seminars but I am hoping you will give me the notes.' And then I am really meticulous about telling them if I can't make it. And I ask them to send me the notes. And they are actually very good. I have to be quite organised and I've learnt a few tricks along the way. For instance, I know that one of the lecturers does all his lectures on PowerPoint. I asked him for a copy of all his presentations so instead of writing everything down off the OHP I can listen to what he's saying and just make notes around it whereas everybody else is desperately trying to copy the OHP. As the semester has gone on, more and more people around me have copies of the OHPs. So I do think that sometimes when you start thinking outside that you can bring a few things in.

I don't do my job any better as a result, not at the moment, but it has really changed me. It's having to think. I think you can spend years without having to think. You kind of just get into this routine of getting up at 6 o'clock in the morning and leaving the house at 7.15 and, you know, life just becomes like that and even on a Saturday, you still wake up at the same time. When I started the degree, I kind of had to halt my life because my whole routine changed, because I had to fit all this stuff into an already quite complicated busy life. But the philosophy forced me to stop and understand what I was studying. I had to understand it or I couldn't do it. And I find understanding it quite difficult. And so thinking was the thing that I started to do that I hadn't done. Actually, I'm not sure that I'd have ever done it. I don't think that I had ever thought of something, analysed it and then had somebody saying 'Yeah, but had you thought about it like this?' I don't think I have ever done that. I've learnt how to do a lot of things and I've been told a lot of things, but I don't think that I had ever kind of thought about things. I can't watch certain things on the television any more because I think 'Well, that's one point of view, what's the other point of view?'

I get on very well with all the groups that I have been with and I've managed to pass myself off as certainly younger than I am. Not eighteen or nineteen but, you know, I don't think people think that I am quite as old as I am. I haven't been with any mature students this year but last year and the year before there were two other mature

students and one of them was part-time. In the seminar groups, there's about 20, 25 students and they're all 18, 19 years old. In the first two weeks in the seminar group, they didn't want me to be in their group and then they'll say 'Do you want to come and have a coffee?' And that's the difficult bit for me because I really would like to sit and chat to them because I think they would be quite interesting. I think I bring something different to the course. Someone might make a sweeping statement about single parents who live on council estates and I bring something to that party because I can say 'Actually, I am a single parent who lived on a council estate. I'm not what you think I am and if you think of someone who is a single parent who lives on a council estate, you don't think of me, you think of somebody else first.' So I think I kind of bring a kind of different dimension to their thought.

If we're working in groups, we email each other rather than meet because that's really difficult for me. I find accessing the library very difficult. At work I'm used to being able to access whole journal articles on screen and print them and that's great. But you have to go in to the library and the internet access isn't very helpful. I've seen a book that I want, clicked to say that I would like it, driven all the way in, which is a 45 minute drive for me, got there and then they say 'Actually, we haven't got it.' In their minds, I'm like all the other students and I've come across the campus and I've wasted 5 or 10 minutes and I haven't got anything better to do anyway. In my life, an hour and a half there and back is a huge drain on my time. What I have ended up doing is buying loads and loads of books. It's not cheap but time's not cheap for me either, and so I weigh it up against that – can I be bothered or do I just buy the book?

With my boss, this whole timetable thing really tests his patience and it gets to the point where he's saying 'This is really not working' and I'm saying 'I know, but I've only got two more weeks to go.' There's the Open University, I know, but I'm not a very self-motivated learner and I wouldn't put time aside to do it. I need people to bounce ideas off and talk things through. I looked into it but I wouldn't get the kind of interaction that I need to learn and I know myself well enough that I need someone to say 'I'm going to ask you about this article' and that will make me read it. If no one asks me about it on whatever day, I'll probably not read it. So, I didn't think I'd get through the OU.

Most of my friends think I am completely mad, especially towards the end of each term when I haven't seen them for weeks on end and they ring me up and say 'For goodness sake, just a coffee, that's all I'm saying' and I'm saying 'No, not only a coffee because I really don't have time.' And I saw one of them for the first time this Sunday and went out for a coffee with one of my friends and she said 'You know, this is ridiculous. Why are you doing it?' I'm not sure why I'm doing it except that I really feel that I need to do it. I want to do it for me. I want to do it, I really do. I know that when I stand there in my gown picking up my degree, I will feel like I have achieved something against all odds because I think it will have been a struggle and it has been at times, it really has been. There's a huge cost to it. I think if were longer than a twelve week burst, I wouldn't be able to do it. I know that I'm struggling emotionally and physically, struggling trying to keep work, the home going. Neil is fifteen and doing his GCSEs this year but is a very independent child and he is very supportive and if I had a child that I had to monitor, if he was out continuously and had problems or was having trouble at school, I wouldn't be able to cope with it all. But I also think it has done amazing things for him because he now knows what it

takes to do a degree. I wanted Neil to have that kind of work ethic that I had grown up with. I was responsible for myself and I wanted Neil to be like that. Though slightly different because I wanted him to know that that's what you do but I also wanted him to have some fun on the way. He wants to go to university but I'm not sure it's influenced by me having gone. I've always wanted him to know that anything is possible so I have always talked about education and whenever we talked about education, education was not when you leave high school. Education was when you completely finished everything you want to do.

People ask what I'm going to do with philosophy and if I'm going to sit on my bum and just think all day. You have an extra qualification on your CV which some people look at and some people don't. Basically, I think if you have a university education on a CV, it makes people think about you more but that only gets you sitting in front of someone. It doesn't get you into the job. But I think I have become more employable because I think more and I really don't think I did that before. For me, there is more on offer out there at the end of this. You know, I don't see this degree as being the last. I think there's more after this. It might not be straight away. It might be after Neil's university career but there is more out there and there is a definite change in direction and I won't be doing what I'm doing now at the end of it. I'm much more confident with my own intelligence. I think I am a different person now to the one that started the degree and I think other people would concur with that.

### ***Harriet Jones: BSc, Nursing Practice***

I'm a community staff nurse. I just love the feeling of going out to people's houses and looking after them at home. I was working in the acute sector before and I really, really enjoyed it but I had been there for a number of years and I wanted to get out and I wanted to do some work in primary care and ended up here. I love my job but I just don't want the politics that goes with it, you know. I've been qualified for four years now and I'm working towards the Nursing Practice degree but, like always, I leave everything to the last minute so I'm trying to cram it all in now.

I'm from a typical working class background. Mum was a housewife and dad was a plumber. I went to the local schools, stayed on at 6<sup>th</sup> form and really enjoyed it. I wanted to be a nurse when I was at school and then I changed my mind and decided that I wanted to be a language teacher. I applied and got a place at university but never really went through with it because my parents got divorced. It was the funding and stuff like that. My younger brother went to university and really enjoyed it but I don't regret not being a teacher. That time after the 6<sup>th</sup> form just went really, really quickly. It was a bit of a shock and I needed to get a proper job. All my friends at school went on to university and they were finishing their degrees and I didn't want to be starting university when they were finishing. I got to about twenty and realised I needed to do something and so I applied to do nursing. That's that, really. It was something that I was really interested in and it was an option that was open.

Now I'm doing a BSc in Nursing Practice. It's part-time and it's four years and I don't think there's a full-time option. It was the one that was most suitable for me where I was working at the time. I don't remember getting any advice on choosing it. It was the one I was directed to. I wouldn't say it was coercion. It was what they

thought was most appropriate and so I just applied for this one. I don't actually need it for my work, and they won't kick me out if I don't have it, but I think if you want to get ahead, then it helps. It helps a lot. You're encouraged to study. Well, let me think about this. My feeling is the government, the Nursing and Midwifery Council and the RCN, they all say nursing is lifelong learning, you need to be seen to be learning. But some work places are more accommodating than others. I mean, they have to be careful giving placements because they don't want everyone going to classes at the same time. I feel that they have to be seen to be doing the right thing but when it comes down to it, your boss has the final say.

I'm doing it because I want to get my degree and it opens more doors for you and if you want to get ahead I think that's what you need to be thinking of doing. I've got friends who are now looking to do their Masters degrees. I think it would be more difficult to move on if you didn't have the degree, especially if you were my age and you're not seen to be doing it. It comes across that you lack enthusiasm. I think it's better if you are 40+ and you weren't seen to be going down that route. I think that's quite acceptable. It makes it difficult if you're working with older people and they've got along without having to study for a degree and they're quite capable of managing their jobs and managing their roles without it. Probably, as far as they can see, it's a nuisance. It's like there's some sort of resentment. They're quite happy with you studying when you apply for a job and then, when it comes down to it and you're asking about placements, you can kind of feel that resentment. There's a lot of, you know, workplace politics as well and maybe someone else will get the placement instead because she's been there longer than me and I don't see why I should do all the hard work and finding out about it and finding out when the deadline is then and then I'm beaten at the post and somebody else gets it.

Anyway, you do four or five modules and a dissertation and you have four years. You choose modules that you want to do and it makes sense if you do modules that you're interested in working in but sometimes you can't choose them because there are no places left. But you can't do modules that aren't relevant because you wouldn't get the permission from work to do them and I know people who have been told they can't do modules because they're not relevant. It has to be for the benefit of your employer, really. When you're applying, you have to get your manager to agree to it and you have to have your tutor's approval. It's not always possible to get on the courses that you want to do because they're oversubscribed or they've made a mistake because the organisation isn't always very good. So I think if they run more courses it would be better. You are supposed to have six days off for each module so that you can go to the classes and then you would have to do your essay and everything else on your own. And you don't pay for it.

Most of the modules have been local, at the university, so there's not the problem of having to travel too far for them. You go to classes and sometimes the courses are just six days long, so if you have a class every Monday, say, on alternate weeks it might last almost two months. Or it might be more than that. Sometimes you can get time off work but sometimes it can create problems. Like, when I went for the interview for my job, I said 'I am doing my degree, is that OK?' and they said 'Yes, that's fine.' But then, when it came to it, when I said that I need these days off, then they said 'But you can't do that, you can't have that time off.' Eventually you get around it but sometimes it can be problematic. In a way, that can be really, really

annoying because what I'm doing, the course I'm doing, it was kind of pertinent to the area where I was working and I had to do some of it in my own time.

It can be difficult to fit the studying in with the rest of your life but I think it is something you have to sacrifice, isn't it. So you do have your nights in, sitting there and writing away. But me, I just procrastinate and put it off and off and off but I think if you want to do it, and I want to do it, then you have to sacrifice some things to get it done. You have to realise that's just part of it. My husband's a computer programmer and he's cool and I get a lot of support and encouragement from him. That's good because I do procrastinate and it's terrifying how easy it is to do that. I sit in front of the computer at home and I find I'm looking at ebay. I think I might go to the university library at the weekend because you're less likely to be distracted there, aren't you. So I get support from my husband and from my friends as well. That's my friends outside work. It's no good talking about it with them because they don't have any idea but most of them, they've already finished their degrees. One friend, I sent him some of my work and he read through it for me which was really handy. And I can always phone them up for advice and they will help you if they can. I think it would be more stressful if I didn't have them to fall back on because sometimes you just want somebody to know that you're struggling or what-have-you.

There might be probably about fifteen or twenty in the class. You have to do a piece of written work or an exam at the end of it. If there are books, you can get them from the library. I've never had a problem getting the books I need. But it's not like when you are a proper student and you're there all the time and you get your little groups. I went on one course and it was really quite full and it was nice because we all banded together and had chit-chats and if you had any muddles or whatever you could just phone each other up. But on other courses I've been on, there isn't that connection and everybody is just on their own. It would be really helpful if you've got somebody else you know doing the course, or, at least, somebody doing something like you're doing where you can join up with them and kind of pick each other's brains and what-have-you and make sure you're doing down the same route. But I don't think you could create that. If it happens, it just happens.

The tutors are quite approachable. It's in their interests that you do well at the end of the day. Some tutors say we can email them with our work and they'll read through it. I've never used it, but it's there for you. And you have your academic advisors. You have support there if you want it but I tend not to tap into it, really. The only thing that has really annoyed me about it all is they're not very good when it comes to giving you your marks. And there's been some duplication of lecture material. One tutor obviously thought she was teaching a different group and she repeated the whole entire thing that she had done before. Everybody sat their patiently just listening to it.

The work and the study fit together well, I suppose, but I haven't enjoyed all of it and I haven't gained what I had hoped. But at the end of the day, my goal is to get my degree so then I can widen my horizons, if you like. I don't know what I'm going to do when I finish. It won't change my role in any shape or form at the moment. I don't think it makes me a better community nurse, either. No, I don't think so. But I think it's good in that it shows you are willing to learn and you are up to date in your learning. What makes you a good community nurse is not something you can be taught but it does set you up for promotion. It can be quite distressful being a student



and sometimes I've really felt a fraud, you know, and I kept thinking 'There is so much that I need to know.' But you can't be expected to know it all, can you?

And there is definitely a sense of relief and satisfaction from studying. But maybe that's just what you feel when you've finished. When I do start writing, I really enjoy it and I like it and you learn things. But I think you'd find out about these things anyway if you needed to know about them. And they teach you to reflect but I think it is something that I would have done anyway. I have to say that I haven't been that impressed with some of the courses because they are woolly and airy-fairy. You expect to learn some solid information, something that's more practical and vocational, and I have to say that some of them don't do that. When you go to enrol on the course, you expect to get all your basic knowledge but I find you don't always get that. You hope there's a point to it when you are applying for it but sometimes you finish the course and you think 'Actually, what was the point?' I think the idea of it is that it's there so you get the better nurses because they know more things but whether it's like that in practice is another matter. I'm sure there are other ways of getting the knowledge, so I can go and look up information if I need it, say. But you won't get the career progression like that. You need the qualification.

I feel that, generally, the rationale for the courses is noble and exciting, although sometimes you feel that you haven't gained the experience or skills that you were hoping for. So, in essence, you're completing a course which has made little difference in advancing your clinical skill or judgement. This is the frustration that I sometimes feel.

### ***Emily Rouse: BA, Open degree (Child and Youth Studies)***

I joined the police force when I was 18. I had 5 O Levels at the end of the fifth year and my parents didn't want me to go on into the sixth form. But the school persuaded them to let me stay on to do Art A Level in one year and at the first parents evening they then convinced my parents to let me stay on for the full sixth form. But I was only doing 2 A levels: English and Art. I ended up with 11 O levels, but it was disappointing because I could have done a third A Level. My parents had no experience of higher education and they wanted me to go out and get a job. I didn't know what to do next and I remember someone in the class in the January of the last year of sixth form saying that he was joining the police force and so I decided to apply. And that was that. I don't remember being that excited about it. But I knew that I didn't want a boring job. I'd worked as a Saturday job in the local supermarket on a checkout and I knew I wanted a job with some variety in it, and the thought of murder one day and a robbery another day was quite appealing.

My brother became a professional footballer and my younger sister left school at 16 and worked in an office. I have loads of cousins, all working class and born and bred in Tottenham, and none had gone on to university. I was always looked upon as the intelligent one of the family. My husband has the same sort of background as me, sixth form and then straight into the police. And he has been so supportive. I know if it weren't for him, I would never have finished my degree. He's a PC, the same as me. We're not interested in promotion, we're happy as we are. It was a career once I

suppose, but when you start having children, it's more about paying the mortgage and having the means to take them for a good holiday.

At the police training centre at Hendon I was always struggling, and there was some of them, they'd spend an hour in their rooms and then come down and play snooker. I couldn't do that. But once I was living back at home and working at a local police station, I could relax and do the studying in my own way, I found it really manageable. I got honours overall, with marks above 85% overall, and I was 2<sup>nd</sup> out of the 50 at the end of the two years. We had to go back to Hendon for a final course and the passing out parade and I remember people saying, 'I don't believe it, you were useless at first'. I loved being in the police at the start. When I joined, you went on patrol, and looked for criminals, and that was what I enjoyed. But it changed gradually to being more like the Fire Brigade. You'd go on shift and there's be 20 calls left over from the previous shift, and you'd just go round catching up on a report of a burglary, report of criminal damage and so on. By 1994, I think I was fed up. I had had both my children and I was only working 3 days a week, but I found it so hard doing shift work. I did manage to get myself an office job.

By about 1998 or 1999, I started thinking about the Open University. I'd heard about it, and I knew it would take six years to get a degree, and I was thinking that I had 19 years service and in 6 years it would be possible for me to retire from the police, I would have a qualification, and I felt I had it in me to prove to myself I could do it. I wasn't sure than what kind of course I actually wanted to do. When I applied, I was in the Traffic Enquiries office taking statements from people who've had accidents. But in 2000, I got a five year secondment to a Youth Offending Team, which I have really enjoyed, and I started to choose the modules I took to fit in with my work. I'd started off thinking about sociology as a broad subject, but in 2000 the OU Introduced 'Childhood and Youth Studies' as a new degree and I thought that suited me down to the ground.

I remember starting and the tutorials were held just down the road and they were packed. There were 20 of us who all lived nearby and were all likeminded people and we met every week or every other week; we even had tutorials in the local pub. It was really good and I felt it was doing something socially as well as academically for me. I always went to tutorials except in 2003 when I had an emergency appendix operation and I couldn't drive for three months. The tutorials have been quite local. There've also been day schools held just before the exams, which I've always gone to. Most of the time, I haven't felt the need for a learning group, but in 2004 I got friendly with a couple of girls on the course and we used to meet to study. Mind you, it took me a while to get back into the swing of studying – but I worked at it and never failed anything. Most of my marks were in the 60%-70% range. An assignment is supposed to take you 6 hours and I usually ended up spending at least 12 hours on it. The feedback has always been good. I would send it off thinking 'That's it, I've done everything I could', and then when it came back I would think 'Yes, I didn't think of that'.

I used to study in the bedroom on a kind of dressing table, but as the kids have got older and they're out on the weekend, I moved into the study. My husband has his computer there as well. What I'd do is read and type up notes and highlight them, and then print them out as an A5 booklet and carry them round in my handbag. I'd also

do about an hour's reading in bed each night. And at the weekend, I'd get up and do the housework and the shopping and then do 5 hours on a Saturday and 5 hours on a Sunday. So altogether it was about 15 hours a week. I always found time to watch my daughter play football on a Sunday though. And when we went on holiday I would just take my A5 book with me. Where I work I can do flexitime, so I would do some overtime and then take a couple of hours study time in the morning and go in later. I was also given 10 study days a year, so when the exams were due I would take 2 days off each week for the five weeks before the exam and have Saturday, Sunday, Monday and Tuesday as a block. And I kept to a strict revision timetable. To be honest, I did also look for any shortcuts: for instance, I spent time working out the questions they might ask, and if on an exam paper there were 4 questions on 4 books and you had to answer at least 2 questions, I would only study 2 books.

I wasn't too bothered about the cost of the degree. I think it's been £400-£450 a course and the cost of a couple of books. If it had been twice that amount, it would have been a problem though. In general, I paid my own way, but in 2003 there was a change at work and the YOT service manager went off on secondment, so they promoted me temporarily for 20 months to be one of two assistant managers. They couldn't give me a pay rise because I was on secondment so YOP paid the fees to compensate. I don't think the police force would have subsidised me – perhaps they would do so for more senior officers.

The tutors have mostly been excellent, but some not, and I do think my marks have been affected by that. I didn't enjoy the last course I did. But 2005 was a bad year. My mum died suddenly and 9 weeks later my father in law died; in fact they were both in the same hospital. So it was really a case of plodding through to the end of the course last year and I was disappointed with the results of my project, which was about how 13 years olds make up their minds about smoking. We had to do some simulated research as you can't do proper research because of police and CRB checks. And when I sent the project off I was really proud of it. But my mark was 53% – my lowest. But I still got my 2:1 which I was thrilled about. I thought I'd dropped down to a 2:2 and I would have been very happy with that, but to get a 2:1 was just great.

I do think about doing a Masters. I'm working with a Roma girl group at the moment. We work with large numbers of Eastern Europeans – about 19% of the young people on our books, and these are 11 Bosnian girls who are all on court orders for theft and shoplifting, so I've started a 10 week rolling group work with them, organised as simple sessions of 30 minutes on things like victim awareness, and problem solving. I just think researching on something I'm closely involved on working with would be really good. But perhaps not yet. I've got my degree and enjoyed most of it, but at the moment I think I need a bit of a rest. But you never know.

My first secondment finished in October 2005, but I've managed to negotiate another 5 years, which would lead to my 30 years in the police force. I might stay on a couple of years past that 'til my husband retires. We'd still neither of us be 50. I love the job I do now so if I did want to leave the police and move completely into youth offending work, my experience and my degree give me more choice. There is a lot of work available based around the criminal justice system. You don't even have to be full-time: you can do agency work.

I'm graduating on June 24<sup>th</sup> at Birmingham Symphony Hall. I've got the maximum 8 tickets and we're staying for the weekend at a hotel nearby with a swimming pool. My sister and brother and my dad will be there and it's going to be a big celebration – it's just sad my mum won't be there. My parents have been really supportive – when I think back to how they thought when I was at school – then they read my assignments and they said 'I can't believe you did that'.

### ***Adam Midcroft: BA, Professional Practice (Social Work)***

I've been in social work for fifteen years now and I've been seconded into a senior practitioner role. That involves staff development, overseeing case loads, allocations, developing policies for the improvement of service provision and for the modernisation of the service. And within that there's the supervision role. I enjoy coming to work. Monday doesn't daunt me. I find there is always a challenge. Nothing is routine. I don't know everything and I try to encourage the workers to work out their own routes to problem solving. I registered for a part-time BA in Professional Practice last year. It's the Practice Teaching Programme I'm interested in, and that's a one year course, but I had to register for the degree to do that.

I went to a secondary modern and enjoyed it but I didn't enjoy studying. Nevertheless, I left school with a whole host of O level passes. My dad was a self-employed flooring contractor and mum was a home help. I have three sisters and a brother and none of us went to university. When I did my DiPSW [Diploma in Social Work] that was the first any of us had to do with higher education. I have nephews and nieces who have gone to university but it just wasn't an option for us. There were a couple of large employers in my home town and when you left school you worked for one of them. That's what I did. Nobody went to university from the estate I grew up on. There was one chap, a little bit older than myself and my school mates, and he went to university. We all looked at him in awe.

I went into social work in 1989, so this is my second career. I started the DiPSW in 1999. That was the first time I had anything to do with higher education and that was only because my employing authority at the time decided that there weren't enough professionally qualified managers in day services so they put up ten secondments for the DiPSW. I had a management qualification but not a social work qualification and I got offered a place and I became a qualified social worker in February 2002.

My intention was to do the Practice Teaching Award but I had to register for a BA to do it. It means that the option is there, if I feel compelled to, for me to go on and complete the degree. But I'll see how it goes. Practice teaching is something that I already have experience of and it's something that I wanted to do even before the General Council's requirements for professional development. But since I joined the programme, I've found out that you don't have to be a qualified practice teacher. You can do practice teaching, and you can supervise students on placement, if you've got sufficient experience. Now, codes change all the time, so whether that is still the case or it's changing so that you have to be qualified, I don't know. I don't know whether I need the piece of paper to validate what I do. It didn't use to be the case. But there's something in me that says if I'm going to practice I want to know that I'm doing it properly and this means that I have been trained to do it and I have something

that says I am qualified to do this. So for me, the actual degree is not as important as the practice teaching. It's not as important as having a qualification that substantiates my work and that's part of the development of social work students.

The programme is for practice teachers in Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk and we're seconded to it. The authority pays for the course and there's a requirement that I will take students on. It's across three counties so when we have our block weeks of study we have to go to each of the three counties for them. We've had one week at UEA, the next one is in Saffron Walden and the third will be in Ipswich but it's not that easy to get to them. A lot of the course is based around my supervision of students here and that involves observations and reports and I have to undertake mentor meetings with a designated mentor who's going to help me develop in the role so I can help the students develop. There are also these written assignments for each module and at the end of the programme I have to produce a portfolio that has everything in it from the first block week. I think this is a good way of approaching it. From producing the first essay, I've done a lot more research and reading into a subject that I knew very little about. It's shown me learning is different to teaching and I have to be aware of how my students learn and provide the opportunities that will encourage their learning. So it will make me better in my own work.

I felt out of my depth when I started this programme. The first day was on learning theories and I didn't know anything about it because I didn't need to with what I was doing. But that's how we started. No induction programme and no preparation except a handbook with the programme so we knew what we were doing at what part of the day. Maybe it would have been better if I could have done a bit of pre-reading. I had no pre-knowledge of the theories so maybe it could have been better if I'd had some knowledge of learning theories. I was in this large group of thirty-odd candidates on the programme and they were quoting theories about this and that and I was sitting there thinking that I didn't really know what they were talking about.

I think that for someone like me, not having a degree, I tend to feel a little bit – Not inferior but academically not as well versed as other people. I don't know whether other people feel the same or not. I had the same feelings when I was doing the DipSW. I always worried about the quality and the standard of the essays and assignments that I was producing and I didn't have the confidence to speak up in group activities. If we talk about issues of practice, I will always open my mouth first and regret it later. And following on from the first day, the learning theories and the learning styles, we moved on to observed practice and we had a small group scenario and I was the one saying 'I'll do that' and I'll participate because I know it's what I do.

My work has been practical. I'm good at that but I'm not a good theorist. I write case studies and reports but I'm not used to writing good academic essays. I know more about the theories now and how they work, for instance, and that's quite good because that's interested me putting that assignment together. There is a little bit of apprehension in me. I would like to do well and I'd like to set my sights high, I'd accept 50% because it's a pass. But I'm committed to learning on this programme because it's something I want to do for my own benefit and for the benefit of individual students and social work as a profession. It develops quality workers.

We're supposed to be in touch with the other students but we don't meet up. I've been in touch with one of the students by email but, as a part-timer, you're not in every day and the group doesn't gel and you don't have that sharing of information and experiences. They are supposed to be setting up support groups so we meet up and that would be useful because you can exchange ideas and debate issues so that you get a perspective outside of your own perspective. And I suppose it's just pleasant to meet up with like minded people who are following the same path, hopefully for the same reasons. I just wish there wasn't so much travelling. One of the difficulties of studying part-time is that work doesn't give me the time to go to universities to rummage through the libraries. The local library can order books in but it's not as easy as it should be. So I've bought some of the books myself. I don't always have to buy them new because there are other people who have just qualified and sometimes I can get the books from them. And I use the internet.

I don't do any study at home because I have a home life so I get in to work at 8.00 in the morning and get the text books out and read and produce my essays at work. I don't have my own office but I can usually get to my established desk because I get in early. Work is supportive of me studying but trying to balance work and study can be like putting a quart into a pint pot. Like I say, I come in to work at 8 o'clock but somebody could come in at 8.15 and I could be typing away on an essay or reading and they've come in early because they've got a problem that needs to be sorted out.

For me, this is a step to personal professional development and I put myself through that because I want to practice from a sound base. But university, I suppose I think that's for intelligent – academically intelligent – people who know the direction their life is going in and have planned it and know what's going to happen. I didn't know where I was going. When I was at school, I didn't. I didn't know where I was going when I got my first job. When I left, I knew what I wanted to do but the route didn't materialise and had I not been seconded on to a DiPSW course, I wouldn't be here now. But everything changes. When I came up here, although I had been in social work for thirteen years, I was an inexperienced qualified social worker. The opportunity arose at the beginning of last year for me to apply for a senior practitioners secondment and I umm-ed and ahh-ed and I had to think if this is what I wanted to do because it is taking me away from the interface. But in terms of the practice teacher, it's what I wanted to do. It also meets the registration requirements of 15 days training so it sorts out three years training in one year.

I don't see it as going to university because I don't feel part of the university world. I don't participate in the other side of the university – the social side of it, the bonding outside of a lecture room. There's all the facilities that the university has but you're not really part of it. You're not really a part of the faculty or of the school. I'm not going to drive 30 miles across to the university in the evening to use the facilities there. Similarly, I'm not going over there to use the library and I'm not going to use the social bar at the student union, you know, where you can gel as a group and you develop relationships and friendships. But for me, this is an opportunity to stay ahead and get more knowledge and I know I've said it several times already but, you know, I prefer to have this input, this qualification because it validates what I'm doing.

### ***Stephen Moore: FD, Counselling***

My plan was to go to university and then become a maths teacher. I was always good at maths and I knew that it was my bread and butter, so to speak. But then I started to think: 'Wait a minute. I've been in the classroom for most of my life so far. If I go off to university I'll be in a classroom and then when I finish I'll come out and I'll go into a classroom and teach maths.' So I didn't go. I had it in the back of my mind that I might go back and go into teaching. It didn't quite work out like that and now I'm doing a part-time foundation degree in counselling. It's a bit complicated but it's a university course that's run through an FE college but they don't have the space there so it's taught at the local college of adult education.

My sister had gone to university but then she left after about three months. She didn't enjoy the lifestyle and she missed home. So she came back and then she did a part-time diploma and she's now studying at the moment for teaching degree through the Open University. Mum and dad, they didn't go to university. A lot of my friends went to university and others didn't. I've got one friend who is now a doctor and another friend who did a degree in geography and now works in B&Q.

Things have changed for me. I know where I am and where I'm going. I mean, three, four years ago, I didn't know where I was going and I didn't really know where I wanted to go. I'm in resource management at one of the big financial services centres and I've been there for seven years. I do enjoy it but my long term goal is that I'd like to go into drama therapy. I'm at an age when I should be qualified to do this job by the age of thirty. That's not too old, especially if I'm going to be working with kids, and male counsellors are something of a rarity. So I know I've got those things going for me and if I can get accreditation and the rest of it, then that makes me even more employable. I'm with two theatre groups and one of them I've been in for thirteen years and the other I set up myself. So that's where my interest in drama comes from. I want to do drama therapy because, for me, it's a medium in which people can safely explore some of the issues that they face in life. I'm interested in people and I get a buzz out of seeing people progress and develop and that, for me, is my way of getting a kick out of things. You've got to enjoy that because, even though there's some quite highly paid jobs in it, I don't think you'd do counselling for the money side of it. I don't think I could take too much of a pay cut because of my studies and having to pay for it all but I'm applying for a job right now and it's on a par with what I'm getting now.

I asked around about counselling and was told I should look at what courses there are at the local college. So I looked at the website, contacted them and applied for the Level 1 course. Then I did Level 2 and Level 3 which I needed for the foundation degree. It was the only course available locally and if they didn't do it here I would have gone somewhere else to do it. The course is three years. I want to study part-time so that I'm not totally burning my bridges and going even further into financial debt that I already am. I actually wanted to do a diploma in counselling rather than a degree because it's only two years instead of three and I could still get a job in counselling with it. Having said that, I'll be more employable with the degree than with a diploma. But the reason I made this choice was that the course for the diploma is part-time as well but it's in the daytime, starting at 9am. I'd have to take more time off work whereas with the foundation degree I'm doing I can get away with only

taking two hours off on Wednesdays and making up two hours is quite easy in my work. Mind you, Wednesdays are a nightmare for me.

We have classes from 2pm to 8.30pm on a Wednesday with a half an hour break in the middle, so it's basically six hours in the classroom every week. Normally I would be working until 4 or 5pm so I got special permission to be able to leave work at 1pm every Wednesday as long as I make them hours up elsewhere in the week. Part of my job is managing people. And this course has helped me to be able to communicate better with people that I'm dealing with so, you know, if they're in a bad mood or whatever, I can deal with it better. So it helps me at work. Anyway, we do modules in the afternoon then we have a break and in the evening we doing more modules. We also have a Process Group in the evening which is a time for all the students to speak about what's been going on for them while doing the course.

There's six of us on the course and I've made quite a close sort of connection with two of the others and we'll email each other and message each other about what we're doing, things that have happened on the course. It's not just about our studies because quite an important part of it is very much about what has been happening on the course between people and what's happening to you as a person. So I can talk to them if I've got a problem with the work. When I'm there at college, we're all in the same boat and we all help each other out. But then you're away from the college and they're not there. But I have the email address of a few of them. I can talk to the tutors and email them as well. But sometimes I don't think they're as supportive as they can be and I don't think they're too keen on reading around the subject – which seems a bit strange. I mean, I get on with the tutors usually but I think there's some issue with that particular tutor.

I'm happy with the course because it's a mix of academic and vocational work. But it's hard work. Every week we have to do a 2,000 word reflective journal. Sometimes it's difficult to get into it but then once I'm in I can't get out. I mean, I took my laptop to work today because I find it difficult to find the time in the evening, at weekends. So I took my laptop in today and sat in my lunch hour and typed out pretty much about 2,000 words. It's just a case of getting started, of finding time to get started. There's an essay for each of the modules. Then there's the reading. There are library facilities at the college and the internet can be useful sometimes. There are some really good sites, like mental health sites, that I can use for my studies. But what I've done for this module is I've gone out and bought the two books which the tutors recommended. They said the others were interesting but not essential and counselling books are not cheap. One of the books doesn't sound very interesting but the other is really interesting.

I might find it easier to study if I worked part-time or worked less hours but that would mean financial problems again. I'm very much a nocturnal sort of person but sometimes I find it difficult to do my studies at night because I'm so tired. There's just me and my dog at home. He's a Labrador. My dad comes over on a Wednesday and takes him for a walk in the evening because obviously I'm at college. With my work and my drama groups and my dog, of course, it's not easy finding the time to study. I have to make the effort to find it and it's usually Sundays. I'm quite lucky in that most of my friends are at my drama group so I see them then. If anything had



to give, and I'm sure it will soon, it'd probably be the drama group I'm only a member of. Not the one I set up.

There's not really the social side of university at the college because it's mainly for people who have gone there straight from school. I don't really want to socialise with eighteen, nineteen year olds. I've got friends who went to university and done the whole party thing but I've also got friends who went to university and had to leave because their liver was going to pack up. I didn't need to go to university to do the living away from home thing and partying with your mates and I've got the things I'd want to do here anyway.

There are problems. Some people have problems with parking but, touch wood, so far I've never had a problem. The time I'm getting there, two o'clock, whatever, is when people have gone for their lunch and so I get their spaces. The real problem is the issues between the adult education centre and the college. Sometimes I think they've not thought things through properly, especially with the different timetables. We had a problem about dates for handing in essays around Christmas and we never actually knew when the deadline was. And so I basically had enough and wrote a two page letter to the powers that be on the course and said I wanted a timetable of when the essays need to be done. And they listened and sort of sorted it out.

But one of the things about the course being at adult education centre is that the communication between them isn't always what you'd call brilliant. So there's the problem with when the essays have to be handed in at the end of the semester and then there's also things like our break. The way it works is that we have a break between 5pm and then we're back in the classroom at 5.30pm. The canteen at the adult education centre is closed between 5.00 and 5.30 so when we have our break to get something to eat it's closed. The timings are all arranged by people at the college and they didn't check that sort of thing. Now they've arranged that the canteen will open at 5pm on Thursday – but we meet on a Wednesday.

## The Students and their Social Backgrounds

The cases illustrate the complexity of part-time higher education as they had experienced by these twelve students. They were chosen to draw attention to the range of opportunities people have to successfully engage with higher education through part-time study as well as to the range of factors that constrain those opportunities. Importantly, the disarray that often permeates their accounts offers a useful counterpoint to whatever clarity the following analyses might offer.

Most of these students had left school and started work before the rapid expansion of higher education in the 1990s accelerated the historically slow outreach to non-traditional students and simultaneously pushed up the educational requirements of the workplace (Wolf, 2002). Few of the older students had obtained standard entry level requirements for higher education (A levels or their equivalents) before leaving school to take up employment and it therefore would have been difficult for them to enter higher education even if they had aspired to it. Their academic achievements notwithstanding, their earlier decisions to enter employment on leaving school rather than continue their studies had been framed by their social backgrounds. Social class continues to exert a considerable influence on educational opportunities (*inter alia*, Archer et al, 2003; Reay *et al*, 2005, Watts, 2006) and aspirations for employment (Watts & Bridges, 2004, 2006). Although it is clear from their accounts that many of these students had become upwardly mobile and entered the middle classes, most of them came from what would traditionally have been described as working class backgrounds. Academics may debate the changing nature of class structures, but these students clearly identified themselves as such. For example, Heather described her father as coming ‘from a very ordinary working class family’ and Graham’s father had been a car park attendant for most of his working life. Higher education was not, therefore, something they would have ordinarily aspired to.

None of these students had parents who had gone to university and it appears that there had been very little encouragement for them to continue beyond compulsory education. This has to be inferred from the absence of any reference to it in most of these cases but Willard indicated this lack of encouragement when he explained that, whilst his brothers had gone to university, his parents ‘didn’t dictate to any of us’ and he had left school at sixteen ‘with no qualifications, no GCEs or whatever it was in those days’ (although it must be acknowledged that his lack of ‘GCEs or whatever it was’ effectively barred him from progressing to post-compulsory education). Emily’s parents, however, were explicit: they ‘didn’t want me to go on into the sixth form... they wanted me to go out and get a job’ (although they subsequently agreed to her entering the sixth form).

Nor, with the exception of Willard and Hayley, had any of these older students had indirect experience of higher education through siblings or school friends. Christine’s friends ‘were from working class families [and] higher education was never talked about as an option. It wasn’t that you couldn’t go, it was just not on the board.’ Similarly, Beth ‘didn’t have a thought of staying on’ at school after sixteen and although Richard had realised he had ‘messed up’ his exams he had ‘never really thought about staying on or retaking anything. All my mates were leaving [school] and I was interested in the money.’ The social backgrounds of these students had steered them away from post-compulsory education and directly into employment:

Heather had wanted to become a hairdresser and Graham, who could not understand why his older brother had stayed in full-time education instead of working full-time, 'couldn't leave school quickly enough. It'd given me nothing of benefit.'

The situation of the younger students is slightly different as they were preparing to leave school at a time when greater numbers of young people were entering higher education. Among these younger students, Stephen and Harriet had both stayed on to take to their A levels (indicating the increasing demand for post-compulsory level qualifications) and both had considered higher education themselves. Coincidentally, both had wanted to teach. However, Stephen did not want his studies to be a financial burden on his family (and also wanted time out of the classroom) and Harriet was deterred by the financial implications of her parents' divorce. In neither case did the pull of higher education overcome the class-based decision to enter employment rather than university. Nonetheless, higher education was not as remote to them as it had been to the older students taking part in this research. Whereas Adam had described growing up on an estate where nobody went to university, and he and his friends had looked 'in awe' at the one person who had got a degree, higher education was more familiar to the younger students who had seen some of their siblings and peers from school progress to university.

Few of these students had required higher education for the work they aspired to on leaving school; and most were content with the jobs they had eventually settled into. Some, such as Richard and Kelly, had returned to formal education in their twenties to escape the routine of dead-end jobs. As Kelly explained: 'I knew that if I went back to college and got better exams I'd have better job opportunities. I didn't really want to go and work in clothes shops and do menial jobs. It wasn't for me.' Others had been involved in in-house training, evening classes and professional training courses (such as those for nursing, social work and the police) but the accumulating responsibilities of families and mortgages meant that unpaid full-time education was simply not a viable option.

Only two of these students had previously engaged in higher education with any success. Beth had obtained an HNC some twenty years earlier and believed that it had helped her career progression; and Adam had obtained his Diploma in Social Work from one of the regional universities. Hayley had obtained a Certificate in Mentoring but she had been unable to capitalise on this and had become stuck in a cycle of low status, low paid and unsatisfying work. Interestingly, none of these three students had identified these earlier educational experiences as higher education; and this requires an explanation that illuminates both the importance and the on-going influence of class-based issues in higher education. Reflecting on his current part-time studies, Adam described university as being 'for intelligent – academically intelligent – people.' This signals the widely-held perception of a divide between 'vocational' and 'academic' study and the belief (alluded to throughout these case studies) that the former is a working class activity whilst the latter is a middle class pursuit that fails to reflect and support working class values and aspirations. Diane Reay and her colleagues found 'glimmers of pride and a related desire to maintain class connections' as students from working class backgrounds reflected on their relationships with higher education (2005, p. 103). This insight helps explain why the students we worked with consistently harked back to their own working class roots: if

it is not possible to participate in higher education and remain working class, then retaining working class allegiances ‘explains’ non-participation in higher education.

At the same time, class-based issues can have a very real impact on working class students. Christine had previously tried to enrol for a full-time degree but could not get the childcare support she would have needed as a single mother on income support. Hayley had taken an access course and actually started a full-time degree programme but had quit because she came to realise it was not what she wanted: she had not been able to access the necessary resources that would have allowed her to make a fully informed choice in selecting her degree. As a single mother, she was further limited by the need to study locally in order to draw upon the support of her family for childcare arrangements. Moreover, she had felt like ‘a fish out of water’ who had ‘nothing in common with the people on the course.’ Social mobility notwithstanding, social class continues to cast a long shadow over higher education; and although the concept of class is now typically expunged from government policy and rhetoric, it cannot be ignored. Higher education remains and, perhaps more importantly, is seen to be a primarily middle class activity at odds with the lives and lifestyles of those from working class backgrounds. Nonetheless, as these twelve case studies show, part-time study has the potential to present higher education as a worthwhile investment.

### ***A Part-Time Option***

Alongside these issues of identity, the students had to contend with the practical problems of juggling their studies with their employment and their family lives. The importance of understanding families and sympathetic employers runs throughout these accounts and alongside descriptions of how their studies permeated the lives of these students. Few of them found it easy juggling these commitments: it was not easy for Heather to complete her assignments when competing for space around the kitchen table with children trying to do their homework; Christine’s relationship with her employer deteriorated over the course of each semester as she rushed between the office and lecture hall; and Graham’s wife had become a ‘student widow.’ Nonetheless, part-time study was the only viable option for these students – if they wanted to engage with higher education.

As we show below, higher education had become more relevant to them and they recognised the value of investing in it. However, having quit formal education, typically at the first opportunity, they had settled into careers and lifestyles that led them further away from traditional forms of higher education. With families to raise and mortgages to pay, full-time study was simply not an option. They were unable to take on the commitment of full-time study alongside their other responsibilities. Nor were they able to take on the additional financial burden of forsaking their income in order to study full-time. As Stephen had explained: ‘I want to study part-time so that I’m not totally burning my bridges and going even further into financial debt that I already am... I might find it easier to study if I worked part-time or worked less hours but that would mean financial problems.’

Two of these twelve students were not working. Heather had chosen not to work in order to raise her family and had to balance her studies alongside this commitment. Kelly would have preferred to study full-time in order to complete her studies sooner and find work as an interior designer. However, had she taken the full-time route, she would not have been able to draw income support and she was unable to find the sort of employment that would pay for her studies and the childcare she would need in order to study. Full-time study was not, therefore, a viable option.

Even though it was often difficult, balancing their studies with their other commitments did have certain advantages. Most obviously, it enabled those in work to continue earning. It also, as Stephen suggested, gave them the security of maintaining current employment: if, for whatever reason, they were unable to transit to new employment on completing their studies, or if they were unable to complete those studies, they would at least still have their job. It also gave them a sense of stability as they negotiated the return to education – something that was particularly important to those who had found it difficult engaging with these higher level studies. Similarly, albeit more subtly, it enabled them to retain the sense of identity that had at least partially been defined by not engaging with more traditional forms of higher education. That is, for all the problems it raised and for all the adjustments that had to be made, part-time study allowed them to maintain some constancy in the other areas of their lives.

## **Approaching Higher Education through Part-Time Study**

Having previously seen higher education as irrelevant, and even antipathetic, to their personal and working lives, it is obviously important to understand why and how these students subsequently enrolled for part-time study. The cases illustrate the four main reasons for engaging in part-time higher education:

- as a professional requirement;
- to enhance their current employment;
- to enhance their future employment opportunities; and
- for personal satisfaction and pleasure.

However, these are not discrete categories and, whatever the initial impetus for enrolling on their degree programmes, each of these twelve students acknowledged that there were multiple benefits to their studies. Harriet, for example, was expected to obtain her degree as part of her continuing professional development as a nurse but she also recognised its potential to enhance her current employment as a community staff nurse and her future employment in other sectors of the health service. Stephen was studying for the specific purpose of obtaining the qualification he needed to become a counsellor (that is, to enhance his future employment opportunities) but his studies also enhanced his current employment. They both also obtained personal satisfaction from their studies. Emily had embarked on her degree for personal satisfaction – as she put it, ‘to prove to myself I could do it’ – but had tailored her studies to enhance her current employment and was also aware that it could increase future employment opportunities. Similarly, Heather recognised that her degree would improve her chances of obtaining her preferred job if she wanted to return to the labour market – something she appeared more inclined to do knowing that she had these greater opportunities.

### ***Part-Time Study as a Professional Requirement***

Although our main focus here is on part-time higher education as a form of continuing professional development (CPD) it can also be a requirement of future employment, whether in terms of a prerequisite qualification (such as Richard’s LLB) or, less formally, as a statement of intent and ability (such as Kelly’s degree in Interior Design). These requirements are dealt with below under ‘Part-time study as a means of enhancing future employment.’

The most obvious examples of CPD in this study were Harriet’s Nursing Practice degree and Adam’s Professional Practice degree; and both indicate the increasing use of higher education as a means of CPD. However, neither are as straightforward as they initially seem. Harriet did not think that she would be ‘kicked out’ of her job if she did not obtain her degree, but acknowledged that she needed it to show willing. Adam had assumed that he required the Practice Teaching qualification (although the recently revised codes of practice he referred to were unclear) but had to sign up for the full degree in order to obtain this specific qualification. Moreover, they both made clear that simply obtaining their degrees would not make them better

professionals. Whilst they both added that learnt a lot from their studies, a distinction therefore needs to be made between acquiring a qualification and making use of it.

Not all professional requirements are as overt as this. There was no code of practice or condition of employment that required Willard to study for his foundation degree in Business and IT; and although his employers were clearly happy to benefit from his studies, it was equally clear that they were unwilling to support him in any practical sense. Within this context, his account illustrates the covert requirements of CPD and professional practice. As Willard explained, 'When you do a job in IT, you've got to be seen to be as good as the people you're working with.' This echoes Harriet's comments on studying to show willing but the discourse here is hidden. For Willard, the expectation of professional standards had become a covert requirement.

Whether overt or covert, the professional requirement to study for a part-time degree does provide the opportunity to engage with and benefit from higher education. Christine had been engaged in other forms of CPD, particularly through various management courses, prior to commencing her part-time degree. However, she had found these courses dull and complained that she had learned little that she had not already learned at work. Pursuing her degree as a form of CPD required her to engage with the nature of higher education and this had taken her beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge. Part-time study as a professional requirement can, therefore, provide those who would not otherwise engage in higher education with the opportunities to access its wider benefits. Adam, in particular, probably would not have participated in this form of higher education if he had he not been required to register for his degree.

### ***Part-Time Study as a Means of Enhancing Current Employment***

As suggested above, the real benefits of part-time study as a professional requirement are to be found in enhancement of current employment; and both Harriet and Adam recognised that their work benefited from their required studies. Whereas required study was typically work-based, several of these accounts indicate that it is not necessary for part-time higher education to be closely related to a specific job in order to enhance the student's employment. Nonetheless, although not required to, several students had aligned their studies with their current employment: Beth, for example, was studying Business Management and Emily was focusing her Open Degree on Child and Youth Studies. Beth had one eye on enhancing her salary along with her current employment, but not all these students were looking for pay rises. Emily was deriving considerable satisfaction from learning more about her specific area of police work and from becoming better positioned to do a better job.

Graham made clear the reciprocal benefits of studying while working. This extended beyond the acquisition of work-related knowledge and he felt that the combination of theory and practice enhanced his work and the satisfaction he obtained from it. There was a general acknowledgement that the degree would not only improve work-related knowledge and skills but endorse them; and that it would make the students more employable in their current fields of work. Graham even spoke of transferring his

skills further – the degree’s formal endorsement of his abilities would enable him to emigrate more easily.

Even where there was no obvious link between the students’ degrees and their work, their current employment typically benefited from their studies. Stephen’s Counselling degree was not directly related to his job in human resources but he felt that he was able to do his job better as a result of his studies. Whether this was recognised by his employers or not, it is indicative of increasing self-assurance and growing confidence. Similarly, Christine’s Philosophy degree, although funded by her employer as a form of CPD, had no immediate relevance to her work as an officer manager and, as she admitted, ‘I don’t do my job any better as a result [of my studies], not yet.’ She anticipated some future benefits but, in the meantime, she acknowledged that her studies had boosted her confidence and self-esteem at work (see ‘Employer Attitudes’ below). Most of these students spoke of improved confidence in the workplace as a result of their participation in higher education; and the unemployed Kelly was confident that she would eventually secure the employment she desired.

Whether the students’ degrees were directly related to their current employment or not, it is clear that their studies enhanced their employment. It is also clear that this was important to most of these students. Located within the wider context of perceived divide between ‘vocational’ and ‘academic’ study and its impact upon working class perceptions of higher education, the potential for part-time study to enhance current employment would seem to be a key element in improving the student’s experience of higher education.

### ***Part-Time Study as a Means of Enhancing Future Employment***

Part-time study had the potential to enhance the students’ future employment in three ways. For some, such as Stephen who wanted to go into counselling and Kelly who wanted to be an interior designer, it was a means of securing the qualifications to change careers. Others, such as Graham and Beth, hoped that it would lead to promotion in their current lines of work. Most of these students acknowledged that it increased their general employability even if they were not looking to secure promotion or change careers.

Stephen and Kelly both needed the knowledge and skills bases that their degrees provided as well as the formal qualifications. Stephen’s need for this academic recognition was straightforward: without the qualification in counselling he could not become a counsellor. Kelly’s need was less obvious but no less important: she needed to make a statement about her future working identity. Her chosen career, interior design, is particularly competitive and she had little to mark her out beyond the natural flair she laid claim to. However, whilst such talents may enable some to obtain their desired job, Kelly was disadvantaged by her social circumstances: as a single mother she had less flexibility to negotiate the exploitation of competitive work environments and this was already reflected in her previous work experience. Her degree, as well as providing her with the opportunity to engage with the real world of



interior design, was intended to make a clear statement to both herself and her future employers that she *is* an interior designer.

For those seeking promotion and progression in their current jobs, the advantages of a degree are more obvious: they provide necessary knowledge and skills and indicate the ability and willingness to advance. Graham had already experienced this since commencing his studies. His increased knowledge, skills and confidence had led to promotion and his income had increased to the point where he was earning more on the four day week he had negotiated in order to keep time free for his degree than he had previously earned working full-time.

These students all recognised that their studies had made them potentially more employable. However, as Christine explained, having an extra qualification was only likely to secure an interview and not the job itself (although she acknowledged that the wider benefits of part-time study – from the demonstration of dedication to the acquisition of skills and knowledge – were likely to improve the chances of securing the job). This benefit of part-time study was particularly important for the most disadvantaged students. Hayley and Kelly had been prompted to register for their degrees because they had both had enough of unsatisfying jobs and saw their studies as a route to better employment.

The potential of part-time study to enhance future employment was summed up by Harriet who explained that doing her degree ‘opens more doors for you and if you want to get ahead I think that’s what you need to be thinking of doing.’ However, it would be a mistake to see these doors only leading to bigger pay packets: for many of these students, the importance of their studies was to be found in the opportunity to enhance their current work or pursue preferred careers.

### ***Part-Time Study for Personal Satisfaction and Pleasure***

A constant theme in these accounts is the personal pleasure and satisfaction the students obtained from their studies. However, only two, Heather and Emily, had specifically embarked upon higher education for this reason; and, having started her degree, Emily soon realigned hers to enhance her work while Heather recognised that her degree would improve her prospects if she chose to return to work. The intrinsic pleasure of studying was thrown into particularly sharp relief when the three single parents (Christine, Hayley and Kelly) compared the struggle of studying with the struggle of existing on income support and in dead-end jobs. Beth summed this up when she described how studying for her degree had stopped her brain from ‘dying’ but, to a greater or lesser extent, all twelve of these students made reference to the pleasure of studying for its own sake.

Much of the satisfaction the students obtained from their studies revolved around work-related issues. Adam and Harriet, despite being required to study, found professional and personal pride in being enabled to do their jobs better. Willard enjoyed working in IT and he enjoyed doing his job well but, although he recognised that his studies enhanced his work, he was not taking his degree for his work but for himself. Stephen, Richard and Kelly all took pleasure in the knowledge that they

were working towards their preferred careers; and this aspect of part-time study was particularly poignant when addressed by the single mothers who had previously had limited opportunities to pursue their preferred employment.

For those who had enjoyed studying at school, part-time higher education had given them the opportunity to re-connect with something they had been previously steered away from. For those who had not enjoyed studying at school, the clearer links between their employment and their part-time degrees enabled them to engage with something that they had previously seen as having little or no value. In either case, their degrees had given them the opportunity to complete unfinished educational business. Part-time study, therefore, has the potential to provide both instrumental and intrinsic satisfaction (and it is likely that both would be undermined by a return to full-time study where the one would recede and the other would be lost amongst financial worries). Although the instrumental value of part-time higher education is more obviously linked to the *Regional Economic Strategy*, the intrinsic value should not be overlooked as it provides a powerful motivation to continue studying amidst the difficulties of juggling those studies with other commitments.

### ***Choosing a Part-Time Course***

Most of these students had gone to their places of study (either directly or indirectly through the internet) for the information, advice and guidance they drew upon to make their decisions to engage in part-time study; and this reinforces both the importance and the limitations of the need to study locally. Some had also sought or been given information, advice and guidance on progressing to higher education from their tutors on pre-degree programmes. Richard had felt that the advice he was given (to study psychology) was steering him in a direction he did not want to go but it does appear that this advice reinforced his belief that he could study at degree level. For others, such as Stephen, the advice they were given simply confirmed the choices they had already made. Several of these students had sought information from the Open University and it is clear that others, such as Beth and Willard, had looked (even if only briefly) at other institutions. None of them had spoken of using outreach centres such as the Learning Shop in Norwich or careers guidance services – although this needs to be set in the wider context of reduced public sector careers services for the over twenty-fives. Most of the students spoke of discussing their part-time choices with family members, friends or work colleagues and this draws attention to the impact of part-time study on these other areas of the students' lives. Whatever the sources, the students typically commented most favourably on the quality of the information, advice and guidance they obtained when it confirmed decisions they were already reaching. They typically complained most about the information, advice and guidance they received from their institutions when their expectations of part-time study were not matched by their experiences. Hayley explained that the 'picture of what part-time study was like was painted very rosily' and her account implies that this was to encourage students to sign up – and pay up – for their courses.

For many of these students, the most important factor in choosing a course was its relevance to their current or future employment: Beth's Business Management degree was directly related to her work as a middle manager in a major company; and

Stephen was studying Counselling because he wanted to be a counsellor. Within these work-bound parameters, some students had a greater range of courses to choose from than others. There were, for example, several nursing degrees that Harriet could have considered (although she was not made aware of them all) and more institutions offer some sort of Business Studies programme than, say, Interior Design. For students who wanted, or needed, to study for a degree that was directly related to their work, other factors then influenced their choices: for Beth 'it was a priority for it to be local'; and Stephen had needed a course that would fit in with his current employment.

Those students who did want or need to focus on work-related courses were guided by personal interest. This was most evident with Heather who had 'hopped about a bit' as she chose 'topics which would be of interest' in pursuit of her degree in European Humanities. Although she was not in work, and was not therefore limited by work-related considerations, it is worth noting that Heather's aspirations for future possible employment were influenced by her studies and she hoped to find work in post-compulsory education or arts administration. Christine, on the other hand, was in work and her employer was funding her degree. However, although she had been given the freedom to choose whatever she wanted to study, her choice was severely restricted by the limited number of part-time programmes at her local university.

Whilst we should be wary of confusing *local* and *nearest* institutions, Christine's experiences highlight the problems of proximity and accessibility. For most of these students, there was a significant element of compromise in deciding what to study where. For some, the particular degree course took precedence over the choice of institution; and where there was no local provision of the courses they wanted or needed, or where the attendance requirements made it unviable, they found themselves travelling beyond their closest institutions in order to study for their preferred degrees. With some students describing travel to and from their places of study that could take up to several hours, and complaints that even these 'local' institutions were too far away, a picture emerges from their accounts of them criss-crossing the region in order to strike a balance between studying for particular degrees and being able to do so 'locally'. For other students, particularly those with greater family commitments, the proximity of the institution took priority. Reviewing the number of institutions she could have attended for a Business Management course, Beth explained that 'I'm not necessarily saying that all those places are equally good, but for me it had to be on my doorstep.' This consideration was particularly significant for the most disadvantaged students. As a single mother in full-time employment who did not want to study via a distance learning programme, Christine had no option but to study at a local institution and her choices were further limited by the part-time programmes it offered. For Kelly (who spent more time walking to her local institution than other students spent driving to theirs) this was not merely a question of convenience but of cost. Being on income support, she could not afford to travel too far for her studies; and more time travelling would have entailed additional childcare costs.

Timetabling was important to most of these students. Willard needed to be able to study in the evenings and Stephen had chosen the foundation degree in Counselling over the diploma because, being taught in the late afternoon and evening rather than during the day, it meant he had to take fewer hours out of his working day. The

majority of courses requiring face-to-face contact had a fixed schedule, usually requiring attendance one day each week, and this made it easier for the students to arrange time off from work as necessary. The significance of this regular scheduling was highlighted in Christine's case: with her part-time studies attached to a full-time programme, she would not know her timetable until the beginning of each semester and would then spend the next twelve weeks frenetically dashing between work and the university in order to attend a patchwork arrangement of classes and lectures.

Distance learning, particularly via the Open University, was an option that some of these students had considered (and that two of them had chosen). Most concerns with distance learning revolved around the lack of regular face-to-face contact with tutors (usually expressed in terms of motivation to get on with studying) and fellow students (which touched upon the social nature of learning). Although both these concerns have some validity, they also indicate several misunderstandings about the nature of distance learning.

Kelly had given serious thought to studying with the Open University but the course she had considered recommended periods of residential study and she would have been unable to afford the consequent child care costs. There was an assumption amongst students considering the Open University that they would be required to attend residential courses during their studies and this had deterred some. However, in response to such concerns, it now only recommends residential courses for about one in four of its courses and it is only a requirement for specific programmes. Whilst this suggests that the Open University should consider revisiting its marketing strategies, it also indicates that students' perceptions of higher education in general are liable to be *misinformed* by more traditional forms of delivery (see also Bridges, 2000 and Watts & Bridges, 2004, 2006) and this has significant implications for the potential to widen participation through part-time study.

Willard raised a further issue that none of the other students touched upon. For him, it was important that his course progressed through the HNC and HND so that he could, if need be, stop short of completing the foundation degree whilst still obtaining a recognised qualification.

Richard had expressed considerable surprise that his course had not been more widely advertised; and the ways in which some of these students came to learn of their courses highlight the need to continuing raising awareness of part-time study as a viable and distinct means of engaging with higher education.

Adam and Harriet had both been directed towards their courses by their employers, although Harriet suggested that she was given limited information about other options (such as distance learning programmes) and the information she did get was passed on from other colleagues and was therefore limited by their knowledge and experiences. Christine had been encouraged towards her degree by her employer but was under no obligation to pursue her studies or to choose a particular course. The other students had all sought information on their own initiative. Some had learned of the part-time courses they had chosen as they progressed through other forms of post compulsory education – Graham through the BTech and Stephen through the Skills for Life programmes they had studied at their local FE colleges. Willard and Hayley both turned to the internet for information about part-time courses, Christine had used the

prospectus from the local university and Kelly had attended an open day at her local FE college. Beth had happened to find a brochure for her local university on a colleague's desk and whilst this may have been fortuitous for her, it does highlight the random nature of accessing information about part-time studies.

### ***Part-Time Programmes***

These cases illustrate two different forms of part-time undergraduate level study: specific part-time programmes (which here include the distance learning offered by the Open University and other institutions) and part-time study on full-time programmes. The majority of these students (nine out of the twelve) were studying on specific part-time programmes with only Hayley, Kelly and Christine studying part-time on full-time programmes.

Most of the students on specific part-time programmes were required to attend their institutions once (and sometimes twice) a week and they progressed through their degrees alongside the same cohort of students. With the exception of Harriet, the courses were delivered on specific days of the week and this allowed the students to schedule regular time off from work. With the exception of Harriet again, this regularity typically meant that they had to study prescribed modules with no room for options. However, only Graham, who felt that some of the prescribed modules were irrelevant to his needs, expressed concern over this.

Graham's programme required him to attend an intensive study day (consisting of four two hour lectures) running from 9am to 6pm; and he had negotiated a four day working week to protect it. The frustration he expressed over apparently irrelevant modules was both exacerbated and explained by the institutional habit of mixing lectures so that he was sometimes studying alongside other students on other courses, including full-time courses.

The courses that Beth and Stephen were taking also required them to attend their institutions once a week; but their classes began in the early afternoon and continued through into the evening. Both recognised that this was relatively convenient in terms of arranging time off work but they also acknowledged that it intruded upon their domestic and social commitments. Beth had negotiated time off with her employers to attend the classes but conceded that this did not necessarily reduce her overall workload as 'there's more to do' when returning to work the following morning. Stephen was given permission to attend his classes providing he made that time up during the week. In addition to these regularly scheduled classes, he would be obliged to arrange additional counselling sessions later in his course and anticipated that they would impact upon his own rather than his employer's time.

Richard and Willard were both studying in the evenings; and part of Willard's course had been delivered over two evenings each week. Although this meant they did not have to negotiate time off work, it did create other problems: they had to get to their classes through rush hour traffic; classes began and ended with people tired after a day's work; it limited the amount of time for socialising with other students; and, for Richard, it meant studying alongside the Student Union disco. In the face of

dwindling numbers, Willard's original group had been joined to another part-time course in his final year but he expressed no concern over this.

The Open University students, studying by distance learning, inevitably had fewer concerns about scheduling time for their studies. However, they still needed to make time for tutorials and Heather made reference to attending week-long residential schools. However, her account clearly locates these residential schools in the past and attendance is now only required of students on specific courses; and Emily, who started her Open University course several years later than Heather, made no reference to residential schools. Although they were able to arrange their own periods of self-study, this required self-discipline; and several other students had dismissed the thought of studying with the Open University for this very reason. Emily was working flexitime and so had some freedom to arrange her work around the most productive times of day to study. She had also been given ten days a year study leave but reserved this for exam preparation. Heather was not in work but still found it difficult making time to study around her other commitments. Both had the freedom to choose which modules to study but Emily had decided to focus on modules that were relevant to her work. Whilst she appears unconcerned that she had spent ten years studying for her degree, it remains open to question whether or not Heather would have finished her in less time if she had not had so much choice.

Adam and Harriet were both required to pursue their part-time degrees as part of their continuing professional development but the programmes were considerably different from each other. Adam's programme of study involved three separate and scheduled block weeks of classroom study and considerable amounts of observed work-based study. Harriet had to apply for each module and, although the classes were regularly scheduled, the schedule varied between modules. They were both given time off for their studies but whereas Adam was expected to attend the study blocks, Harriet had to obtain approval from her place of work for each separate module. Adam's modules were prescribed but Harriet was free to choose which modules to study providing they were relevant to her work. This meant that Adam was studying in the classroom with the same cohort throughout his course whilst Harriet typically found herself studying with different students for each module.

Hayley, Kelly and Christine were all studying part-time on full-time programmes and this meant they were all required to attend their different institutions during the day. Coincidentally, they were all single mothers and day time attendance reduced the need and the cost of childcare as the older children were in school (although childcare arrangements were necessary for the younger children). However, this does not appear to have influenced their choice of degree programme. As Christine made clear, family responsibilities could delay enrolling for a degree programme of any sort. As they were not studying with cohorts of part-time students, they did not have the group continuity of those students studying specific part-time programmes.

Hayley had hoped that she would be able to attend all her lectures and seminars on one regularly scheduled day a week but, as she explained, 'the picture of what part-time study was like was painted very rosily. I got the impression that I could fit my study to suit my work but it proved to be not the case.' Doing shift work meant that she was free to attend lectures and seminars during the day but she had to be strict about leaving work on time (although her low status employment suggests she had

little incentive to do otherwise). However, at the time of her involvement in this research, she had been barred from formally attending the university because of her inability to pay her fees.

Kelly's programme required her to attend the college two days a week, from 9.30am to 3.20pm. As the full-time course only required an extra day's attendance, this meant that she had considerable interaction with the full-time students. She did not have to negotiate time off from work as she was unemployed.

Christine's course presented her with considerable difficulties. She was taking two modules at the time of her interview which meant attending four lectures and two seminars each week. However, these six hours of study were spread out over three days of the week. As she explained:

For instance, I have a lecture from 11.00 to 12 noon on a Monday and then nothing until 2.00 to 3.00. So I could go back to work, which will essentially get me back to work for about forty-five minutes before I have to come back again and the parking is horrendous. And that's just one day.

She was free to choose which modules to study but felt obliged to limit those choices according to the attendance requirements of each module in order to minimise disruption at work. However, timetables for each semester were not published in advance and so she could only guess at those times with guidance from previous timetables and as much information as the administrative staff could provide. To make matters worse, she would not get the timetable for each semester until registration day at the beginning of that semester; and this severely restricted her freedom to schedule her work commitments. As she rather succinctly pointed out 'not knowing when I should be around for the next twelve weeks would be a bit of a nightmare.' She was allowed to take time out of the working day to attend the university as long as these hours were made up; but even though her employer had encouraged her to study for her degree (and was funding it) the irregularity of these attendance requirements were straining this support.

Although these students often turned to the internet to support their studies, and they may have been given web-related assignments, none of them were engaged in any form of web-based learning. However, as many of them valued the opportunity to study alongside their fellow students, and several of them had specifically rejected distance learning for this reason, it remains open to question whether they would have chosen programmes making use of web-based learning.

### ***The Costs of Part-Time Study***

As noted above, this research took place against a background of changes to the ways higher education is funded by the government and paid for by the students. However, these changes had not influenced the decisions of these students to study part-time.

Course fees vary between institutions and courses and we do not intend going into that detail here. The total cost of these fees depends upon the number of modules being studied at any one time but none of these students had reduced the number of modules they were studying simply because of the cost. However, the new deal for students will only be available to those studying at least 50% full-time and may, therefore, influence the decisions made by future part-time students. Similar restrictions apply to most existing financial support schemes (such as the government's Access to Learning Fund) but most of these students appear to have been unaware of them (below).

Not all these students were paying for their studies. Harriet and Adam, who were overtly required to pursue their studies as part of their continuing professional development, had their costs met by their employers. However, Willard, who was covertly required to study, had asked for financial support from his employers but this had been refused. Christine and Beth both had their fees paid for by their employers; and Emily's employers had paid her fees in lieu of a salary increase when she had taken on additional responsibilities at work but this support was conditional on her studies being work-related. Richard's employers offered a 'pound for pound' matching scheme so that they met half the cost of his course but, as with Emily, this was conditional upon his studies being relevant to his work.

Students on income support have their fees paid. However, this had tied Kelly to part-time study when she would have preferred to study full-time. She could not afford to lose her income support by studying full-time and, had she taken this financial risk she would have been liable for the additional cost of her fees.

Other students were self-funding; and for Graham, who did not want to be indebted to his employers, this was important because he saw it as a means of claiming ownership of his studies and the benefits they would bring.

Richard had been given the option of turning to his parents for financial support but he had not taken advantage of their offer. None of the other students had spoken so directly of being supported by their families but spousal support is implicit in the comparison of the accounts of the single parents with the other students.

For those without these safety nets, financing their studies could be a considerable worry; and this was most evident in the case of Hayley who was unable to formally continue her studies because she was unable to make the payments. Her situation was made worse by her inability to escape the cycle of low-paid employment; and it was further exacerbated by the need to repay the student loan she had taken out for her earlier, and unfinished, full-time degree.

The Open University students were generally grateful for the Student Budget Accounts that allowed them to spread the cost of their fees; but no other institution appeared to have a similar scheme.

Most institutions make at least some provision for financial aid, including the government's Access to Learning Funds. This support may be for fees and/or other costs and is typically available to any home student studying at least 50% full-time. However, only Kelly had been able to make use of the Access to Learning Fund and



that was only for her first year of study. Although few of the other students would have been eligible for it, none of them appear to have been aware of this or other financial aid schemes.

The cost of part-time higher education is not limited to fees: travel costs, books, course materials and childcare all need to be taken into account. The potential indirect cost of loss of earnings was not generally recognised by these students although it remains a concern in the wider access debate (e.g. Watts & Bridges, 2004). It seeped into Kelly's account as she explained that full-time study would mean losing her benefits but only Graham had reduced his working week in order to accommodate his part-time studies and he had seen his income rise as he had obtained more and more qualifications.

The cost of travel was directly linked to the location of the institution and was multiplied by the number of days the students were required to be in attendance. Most students were required to travel to their institutions once or twice a week but Christine, fitting her studies in with the full-time programme and her full-time job, sometimes found that she had to travel to her university twice on the same day and up to three times a week.

Several students had found it more cost effective to buy their own books rather than negotiate the difficulties, as well as incurring the travel costs, of accessing institutional libraries. These difficulties sometimes meant that it was difficult to return books on time leading to occasionally heavy fines. Some received financial support from their employers to purchase books.

In addition, Kelly had to purchase materials for her Interior Design course and she had described how being unable to meet these costs – she made specific reference to a pen costing £3 – had sometimes affected the quality of her work.

For the single mothers, there was also the cost of childcare to take into account.

Difficulties in meeting these costs could affect the students' ability to study. This was most obvious in Hayley's case where she had been left in the position of not being able to pay for the degree that would have enabled her to get the better job she needed to repay the debts she needed to clear in order to afford the cost of her degree. The costs of part-time study inevitably fell most heavily on the most disadvantaged students; and it is, perhaps, no coincidence that Kelly and Hayley are both Black single mothers.

### ***Employer Support***

Where employers offered support it took the form of financial support and/or time off. There was no straightforward link between the willingness to offer support and either the size of the employer or the employment sector.

Harriet, Adam, Willard and Emily, for example, were all government employees (respectively through the health service, county council, local council and police) but

only Harriet and Adam had their fees guaranteed because their studies were a part of their CPD. Willard had been refused financial support and Emily only received discretionary support. Christine and Beth both had their fees paid for by their private sector employers but Beth worked for a major company whereas Christine worked for a small enterprise.

Time off included both study release with no overt obligation to make that time up and flexible working arrangements. Three of the four public sector employees had study release and it appears unlikely that Willard would have been given time off to study if he had requested it. Several students working in the private sector were given time off but, in practice, the distinction between study release and flexible working arrangements was often blurred: both Christine and Beth appear to have been given study release but both found themselves catching up on their work when returning to the office.

Regularly scheduled study timetables made it easier to arrange time off; and the unpredictability of Christine's timetable placed considerable strain on her work (see The Employer's Perspectives, below). Harriet spoke of, but had not directly experienced, similar problems in the health service.

Surprisingly, very few students spoke of receiving simple encouragement for their studies alongside these other forms of support. Willard's employers, having refused any financial support, were prepared to reap the benefits of his studies but appear to have been indifferent to them otherwise.

None of the students mentioned the prospect of any reward from their employers for completing their studies. However, several explained that they anticipated some form of promotion or hoped to use their degree to negotiate a pay rise.

The employers' perspectives of part-time study are addressed below.



## **Engaging with Higher Education through Part-Time Study**

### ***Reconnecting with Education***

Engaging with higher education was a daunting prospect for many of these students and they approached it with varying levels of confidence. Few appear to have attended any induction courses and they were not, therefore, always adequately prepared for their studies. Several of them had expressed concerns about entry level requirements; and the specific concern of some that they did not have A levels indicates a limited awareness of the changing nature of progression routes to higher education. Whilst those who had attended access courses or had progressed from other forms of study were generally aware that entry no longer required the ‘gold standard’ of A levels, others had been surprised when they were offered places on the strength of their existing qualifications and/or experience. Richard offered a sad commentary on the market forces of higher education when he recalled that he did not ‘remember there being many questions about qualifications.’

Seiffert & Mills (2005) have argued that the region’s further education colleges typically have a better understanding than its universities of the potential difficulties students on foundation degrees are likely to experience as they engage with higher education and are more adept in offering them greater and more appropriate support; and this articulates with the further education sector’s tradition of reaching out to students from non-academic backgrounds (Widdowson, 2003; Cristofoli & Watts, forthcoming). Such support is important for students returning to higher education on a part-time basis and needing to juggle their studies with their home and work lives. Kelly’s account indicates the all-round level of support offered to higher education students in the further education sector and additional evidence of this was found in the wider study beyond the cases presented here. However, in terms of institutional understanding of the potential problems part-time students were likely to experience and institutional responses to them, we found a more significant distinction between the pre-1992 universities (excepting the Open University) and the post-1992 universities and further education colleges. It should be acknowledged, though: that individual staff in the pre-1992 universities often made personal efforts to respond to the difficulties of part-time students; that CPD courses run through these institutions were typically set up to meet the needs of the students; and that the real problems were found in attempts to integrate part-time students on full-time courses. Moreover, the post-1992 universities and further education colleges were not problem-free zones for part-time students. Nonetheless, this does suggest that the pre-1992 universities are less adept at making institutional responses to the needs of non-traditional students engaging with non-traditional forms of higher education (see also Bridges, 2000).

Graham had progressed to his degree through a GNVQ and had initially enrolled on a fast track honours programme. However, he did not appreciate what it involved and consequently extended his course. Others also felt out of their depth despite having been engaged in some form of post-compulsory education: Adam found the shift from practice-based learning to theory to difficult; and Christine’s management courses had not prepared her for studying philosophy. Those who had not studied since leaving school experienced considerable difficulties. Beth neatly summarised the concerns of the older students when she explained that ‘it was the first time that I’d done any kind

of studying in 20 years, in fact, it was almost exactly 20 years since I sat my last set of exams.’ She had ‘found the first year a real struggle.’ Similarly, reflecting on the assignments he was expected to write, Willard pointed out that ‘I’d never written something that length before in my life. So at the beginning it was a bit of a nightmare but you struggle through and then it starts to get easier.’

Hayley and Richard had both taken access courses several years before enrolling for their part-time degrees. Heather had found the Open University foundation courses beneficial<sup>2</sup>; but it appears none of the other students had been required to take an access or other preparatory course before beginning their studies. As Beth ruefully suggested, it was ‘a pity that there was no kind of “how to study” course at the beginning’ instead of later in the course. Kelly and Christine both described how concerns about their existing qualifications had been allayed by interviews with tutorial staff. For others, similar concerns were initially left unanswered; and, as Adam explained, this could leave them feeling inferior.

None of the three students in their twenties (Stephen, Harriet and Kelly) reported difficulties engaging with their studies. Nor were there such concerns from those who had taken access courses. Most of the (mostly older) students who voiced concerns about re-engaging with education were on specific part-time programmes and it remains unclear whether or not the early stages of these programmes simply integrated introductions to study. Nonetheless, their concerns highlight the need to ensure part-time students (particularly older students) are properly introduced to studying again.

For all their concerns, the students settled down with considerable determination and most soon discovered that they enjoyed studying. Heather, describing how she would crowd round the kitchen table with her children as they all struggled for space to do their homework, ‘loved it all; I loved the writing.’ The pleasure these students typically experienced becomes easier to understand when contextualised by the mental lethargy many of them described and that Kelly, reflecting on being stuck at home with her children, summed up as being ‘like your brain isn’t actually working.’

## ***Course Content***

The students generally appeared content with the contents of their courses.

Heather and Christine were the only students taking courses unrelated to their current or future employment (European Humanities and Philosophy respectively) and their concerns focused on re-engaging with academic study rather than the content of their courses.

Those taking specific work-related courses (whether to enhance their current or future employment opportunities) typically appreciated the blend of practical and academic

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<sup>2</sup> The OU’s foundation courses, which predate the current foundation degrees, lead to 60 CAT points at level 1. That is, they are first year university courses rather than preparatory or access courses as the term may now currently suggest.

foci. This blend played a significant part in the successful engagement with higher education of those who had been away from academic study for some time. Having described feeling out of his depth with the theoretic aspects of his course, Adam explained that when they moved on to its practical elements ‘I was the one saying “I’ll do that” and I’ll participate because I know it’s what I do.’ For Kelly, sent off to interview interior designers for one of her assignments, the practical elements of her course gave her the opportunity to engage with the working world of interior design as well – something that she had not previously been able to do.

However, several students were concerned that their studies were sometimes irrelevant to their needs. In Graham’s case, this appears to be related to the institutional habit of cramming students from different courses into the same lectures; and the tendency, as he saw it, to prioritise the full-time courses in these circumstances meant that he sometimes ‘felt like a bit of a second class citizen here.’ Harriet was concerned that some of her courses were too ‘woolly’ and that they failed to provide the practical knowledge she had been expecting. Beth felt that some of the younger tutors (who she described as ‘professional academics’) could be ‘too theoretical and too idealistic’ and that ‘some of the situations they are talking about simply wouldn’t happen in our work situations.’ She had, though, also explained that she needed practice ‘opening my brain to absorbing all that information’ and it is possible that (genuine complaints notwithstanding) what these students saw as irrelevance marked the distinction between practice and theory.

Nonetheless, her comments (particularly those on ‘professional academics’) draw attention to the potential difficulties of integrating the ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ aspects of higher education. They also raise issues (far beyond the scope of this report) about what constitutes the *higher* in higher education and what students should expect and demand of their degrees in the context of the government’s drive to reposition them as consumers paying for their higher education. Here, though, we shall limit ourselves to the observation that tensions generated between the academic and vocational aspects of higher education are not unique to part-time studies but they may be more keenly felt part-time students struggling to find time for their degrees alongside their other commitments.

There is a very real possibility that part-time students are seen as second class citizens subjected to the woolly teaching of irrelevant subjects. However, few of these students had gone through any form of induction programme and it may be that their expectations of higher education were at odds with those of their tutors and lecturers.

### ***Engagement with Tutors***

Richard complained that it was not always possible to access his tutors when attending his university in the evenings. Inevitably, and for the simple reason that they spent less time attending their universities and colleges, these students had fewer opportunities to engage with their tutors than most full-time students. However, most were content with the level of support they received and it appears that those who reported the most support were typically those who most sought it.

Few of the students complained to us about their tuition. Some complaints focused on specific incidents: Graham had received what he considered to be a public 'dressing down' over one piece of work; Beth described how a replacement tutor had once left her class to just get on with irrelevant work; and Stephen protested that his enthusiasm for reading round one particular subject had been peremptorily dismissed. There were also more general complaints: Graham was concerned with the levels of disruption in some lectures; Richard suggested that some tutors could have circulated their notes by email rather than simply reading them out in the class; Willard was similarly bothered by passive teaching (although he acknowledged that everyone, including the tutors, was tired by the end of the day); and Harriet described an occasion when a tutor had simply repeated material delivered in an earlier class (although she went on to explain that everybody 'just sat there patiently listening to it').

Many of these complaints can be located in Beth's explanation that face-to-face time with tutors is 'precious' for part-time students. As the medium between the students and their courses, it is not surprising that the tutors should be the focus of student concerns. So, whereas those students who sought support generally received it, as Beth also pointed out, 'being 'professional at what we do... we expect the same standard' and, as Willard suggested, it would be beneficial if that support was made more obvious. Nonetheless, where complaints had been made to or about the students' tutors, they had generally been resolved.

It can be inferred from these relatively few complaints that the students were generally content with the input and support of their tutors; and, as Harriet pithily pointed out, it is 'in their interests that you do well at the end of the day.' Kelly's confidence had been boosted because the tutors had encouraged her to apply to the course and so she 'felt a bit more positive about doing it. Whereas before, I thought it would be something I wouldn't be able to do.' Willard felt that he got extra support as he took the course seriously, did it properly and funded it himself. Several commented on the importance of being able to email their lecturers and tutors for advice and guidance. Emily's approbation was clear from the pleasure radiating from the account she gave of her tutorials (especially those conducted in the local pub).

Most of the students were on specific part-time courses and it is assumed that tutorial support acknowledged the particular needs of part-time students. The low level of complaints suggests that these needs were at least adequately met.

Turning to those students studying part-time on full-time programmes: Kelly's wish for more tuition was related to her desire to study full-time; Hayley's considerable concerns about having her work assessed were generated by her financial difficulties rather than her status as a part-time student; and Christine described considerable support as she struggled to juggle her studies with her work and family commitments. Explaining that she had 'no shame' in making herself and her situation known, she frequently emailed her tutors in the event of difficulties arising from studying part-time – whether because she had failed to grasp a particular point as she rushed between the office and seminar or because work commitments meant she was unable to attend lectures. It is significant that she began each module by emailing her tutors to introduce herself as a part-time student with other commitments and that she made a point of emailing her apologies in advance if she had to miss anything. She had found that the tutors were always willing to send her copies of their notes and

presentations, suggesting a willingness to respond to the circumstances of part-time students if those circumstances are made known.

### ***Engagement with Other Students***

The students typically focused more on the opportunities to engage with their part-time peers, indicating the social nature of learning and the importance of integrating with others who, as Stephen suggested, are ‘all in the same boat.’ Developing and maintaining relationships with other students was seen as especially important because it provided networks of support. However, it was not always easy to do and contacts were usually limited to other students taking the same courses and modules. It was, therefore, generally easier for those students on specific part-time programmes to establish these relationships because they had regular and frequent contact with their colleagues. Those studying part-time on full-time programmes found it much more difficult.

Looking back on her early Open University tutorials, Emily thought they were ‘really good and I felt it was doing something socially as well as academically for me.’ These networks formed most readily in the classrooms and tutorial groups where, as Emily indicates, they had both social and academic value. Most of these students enjoyed some social interaction with their part-time peers, even if it was only limited to a celebratory drink at the end of each semester, but the social dimension of these networks had a greater significance: they gave them the opportunity to learn alongside others who were also apprehensive about returning to education and studying part-time. Even when the groups were highly diverse, their studies, and their reasons for studying, gave the students a common focus and identity; and, even with their diverse backgrounds and experiences, none of them reported feeling like ‘a fish out of water’ as Hayley had done when studying for her full-time degree.

When these networks developed beyond the classroom, they offered the significant academic support Harriet summed up in explaining that ‘if you had any muddles or whatever you could just phone each other up... and kind of pick each other’s brains and what-have-you.’ Such networks were able to provide forums for discussing what had been taught and, when necessary, for working on set projects. They may be more readily available to full-time students but they have great potential value to part-time students struggling to fit their studies around their other commitments, taking classes in the evening when everyone is tired and losing concentration or simply flustered by the rush from the office to the classroom.

Those students on specific part-time programmes found it easier to form such networks but they did not always cohere around them. Willard, for example, had found it difficult to maintain contact with the other students on his course because he attended evening classes and the students, rushing in from work and rushing home afterwards, had no time to socialise at the college. Only Stephen and Harriet had specifically spoken of maintaining contact with their peers by telephone although others, such as Christine and Beth, had noted the importance of using email. It may seem strange that others appeared unable to maintain contact at a distance like this but



it again draws attention to the social nature of learning and the extent to which some of these part-time students were excluded from this aspect of their studies.

The students studying part-time on full-time courses found it more difficult to establish these networks. It was less of a problem for Kelly because she was studying two thirds full-time and the practical elements of her degree required her to integrate with the full-time students. Consequently, and as her domestic circumstances allowed, she found herself socialising with the full-time students more frequently than either Hayley or Christine. Each semester found them having to negotiate their way into another new cohort of students. This created particular problems when it came to doing group work and socialising was quite often next to impossible. Christine's description of eventually being invited to join the full-time students for coffee at the end of a lecture only to have to dash back to work illustrates the difficulties of engaging with other students on both these levels: academic interest (or, at least, the need to do academic work) is central to much student socialising and socialising allows students to engage with their academic interests and work. Then, having finally established themselves within these networks, as Hayley pointed out, 'the way the course is set up, I'll lose contact with many in the group' at the end of the semester.

Very few part-time students spoke of engaging with other students, whether part or full-time, studying other courses.

Opportunities to engage with other students have academic and social importance; and the two elements are closely bound up with each other. Students enrolled on specific part-time programmes typically attended regularly scheduled classes together and progressed through the programme together and they therefore had greater opportunities to engage with their peers. However, as Harriet observed, 'I don't think you could create that. If it happens, it just happens.'

### ***Engaging with Other Aspects of the Higher Education Experience***

Other aspects of higher education include here accessing institutional facilities and services and taking part in the wider social life of universities and colleges. Few of these students had the time to engage with other aspects of higher education and fewer still expressed any desire to do more than use their libraries and find some sort of refreshments to keep them going between classes.

Most of these students found it difficult to make use of their institutional libraries. Access to standard and specialised textbooks is an enduring problem for all students for the simple reason that there are more students wanting to use the same books as there are copies of those books. Full-time students living on or near campus and regularly and frequently meeting their colleagues are typically able to negotiate this problem by sharing books, turning to photocopiers and making use, where they are available, of short loan and reference collections. These options are not always available to part-time students typically living at some distance from their institutions and unable to capitalise on the sharing arrangements of student networks.

The problem for most of these part-time students was not so much library opening hours as the limited time they were able to spend at their institutions when attending classes and the distances they had to travel to make specific visits to the library at other times. Online services, where they were used, were criticised for not allowing students to reserve books from the shelves; and library staff were sometimes criticised for their seeming indifference to the obstacles faced by part-time students. As part of the research, staff at several libraries were asked to reserve books that were shown as being on the shelves and every time they responded that there were not enough staff to allow this. Those students who were able to access journal articles online found this service useful but not all of them appear to have been aware of it. Moreover, journals have less value (particularly at undergraduate level) than standard and specialised textbooks. Some of these students were able to access other, closer institutional libraries or made use of their local public libraries. Others found it easier to buy their own books which, as Christine explained, is 'not cheap but time's not cheap for me either.'

Few of the students had made use of institutional IT facilities with most having their own computers and access to internet at home.

The lack of refreshment facilities were a particular bugbear for students attending evening classes. The frustration this can generate was summed up by Richard who pointed out that 'the drinks machine often isn't working for Christ's sake' and then added that 'this is indicative I think. There's not much consideration of part-timers.' However, complaints about out of hours refreshment facilities were typically resolved when and if they were raised with the institutional authorities.

Parking presented particular problems for students attending daytime classes; and, as Christine graphically explained, off-site parking is not a real option for students rushing to their classes from work. Some institutions outside the region have reportedly called for parking spaces to be reserved for part-time students.

Access to other facilities and services were clearly limited as few, if any, of these students mentioned them. Only Kelly had needed to make use of the institutional childcare facilities and only she appears to have made use of the student support services when she applied to the government's Access to Learning Fund. The obvious caveat here is that few of the other students needed to use these support services but it raises the question of whether not knowing about them deters other potential students from applying to part-time (or, indeed, full-time) courses.

None of the students we worked with appeared to have made use of institutional careers advisory services. This is not surprising as most of them were in work and those who were studying in order to change careers knew what they wanted to do. However, as higher education has the potential to open up employment opportunities, and particularly given that most of these students reported that their studies enhanced their self-confidence, it may be that they could benefit from careers advice – the more so as public sector careers services for the under twenty-fives have been greatly reduced over the years.

Turning to the social side of higher education, some of these students would have liked the opportunity to socialise with their fellow students (whether part- or full-

time) but were restricted by time and distance. Only Hayley and Kelly expressed any specific desire to engage with the social side of their institutions; and it is, perhaps, no coincidence that they are both single mothers and therefore had limited opportunities to socialise elsewhere. Kelly had been able to spend some time socialising with her fellow students (both part- and full-time) but Hayley complained that there were no social events for students with families. Of these students, only Hayley was involved with her institution's Students Union and Graham's complaint that he had not been informed about the Student Union when enrolling for his course suggests that part-time students may not know that they are part of this student body. With the obvious exception of the Open University, none of these institutions appeared to have a specific part-time student association although several now have a Mature Students Union.

Most of these students made the simple observation that they neither wanted nor needed to enjoy the social scenes of their various institutions as they had their own social networks. However, it seems that their views of the student social life were at least partially obscured by the stereotypical 'sex and drugs and rock and roll' image and assumptions that most social activities were geared towards younger students. Notwithstanding Graham's comment that he would like to be offered some drugs to complete his student experience, few of these students appeared aware of the range of social activities taking place in most institutions.

Access to the facilities and services the students knew about and wanted to use was often restricted by the circumstances of their part-time status. Resolving the difficulties they, and other students, experienced when attempting to use their institutional libraries is difficult; and little short of massive investment in books and staff, as well as online publishing, is likely to fully resolve them. In the meantime, however, a clearer understanding of inter-library lending schemes and reciprocal arrangements between institutional libraries enabling students from one institution to use the library at another may be advantageous to at least some students (including full-time students).

Those students who were using other institutional libraries appear to have learned about this themselves; and this, to borrow Richard's criticism of the availability of drinks machines, is indicative of the attitudes many students perceived. Few of these students had attended induction courses, either because they were unable to or because they were not on offer, and few of them were able to socialise with other students. Yet these are the formal and informal means of learning how to *be* a student in higher education. They allow students to find out what is happening, what is available and how to make use of it all. Specifically informing students of the facilities and services that are available – from interlibrary lending, student support services and careers advice through to the Student Union and the various clubs and societies – may well go some way to alleviating the sense many part-time students have that they exist on the fringes of their universities and colleges.

## **The Benefits of Part-Time Higher Education**

### ***Benefiting the Students***

There were both instrumental and intrinsic benefits to be had from the students' investment in part-time study. What is, perhaps, most interesting is that while some of these benefits were expected prior to their engagement with higher education (and typically motivated that engagement) others only became apparent once they had started. These unexpected benefits, such as the pleasure they obtained from their studies, can be traced back to their class-based attitudes to compulsory education and therefore clearly link part-time higher education with the regional concern to promote social inclusion (EEDA, 2004, pp. 56-62).

Many of the work-related benefits the students anticipated were obvious and included increased salaries, promotion prospects and the opportunity to pursue preferred employment. Some students were already reaping the benefits of their educational investments: Graham's promotions had seen his salary increase to the point where he could afford to work a four-day week in order to protect his study time; and, just as we were completing this report, we learned that Stephen had been offered the job he had applied for. However, it would be wrong to suggest that all these students saw the benefits of their studies in terms of money. Several students described less tangible work-related benefits, particularly the satisfaction of doing their jobs better.

All twelve students observed that they enjoyed their studies. Not all of them had expected this. Whilst this was often linked to the work-related benefits they were enjoying or anticipating, the intrinsic value of their studies is clearly discernible in their accounts and several stated their intention to progress to postgraduate studies. The significance of the satisfaction studying engendered in these students should not be underestimated: part-time study is rarely an easy route through higher education and its intrinsic benefits play an important part in maintaining the determination to succeed.

Some of these students had enjoyed the social side of their studies and, where they existed, the social networks they had built up typically enhanced the learning experience. Few of them, though, had wanted to participate in the wider social life of their institutions and those who did were those who had the most restrictions on their own social lives. Several students commented on a more subtle aspect of the social nature of learning. They hoped that their engagement with higher education would encourage their children to consider university – and this highlights one of the most important characteristics of part-time study.

Part-time study had given these students a 'second chance' to participate in higher education and few, if any, of them would have been able to study full-time. For some, it allowed them to make up for previously lost opportunities. This is most obvious in the cases of Hayley (who had had to drop out of an earlier full-time course) and Christine (who had not even got that far) but its significance extends to all these students. Although few of them had seen any value in higher education then, the cases clearly show how the circumstances of their backgrounds had conspired to steer them away from post-compulsory education and into employment. Having entered

the world of work, some had realised the need for better qualifications – particularly when their lack of qualifications restricted their job prospects. Later in life, they had typically come to realise that higher education would enhance their employment opportunities. However, if their work had made them realise what they wanted to do (or, in some cases, what they did not want to do) it also severely restricted what they could do – most obviously because they needed to stay in work in order to earn an income. Full-time study was not a viable option. Part-time study, though, even with all its problems, gave them the relative freedom to take charge of their lives and participate in higher education.

Part-time study had further significance that was less immediately discernible: for most of these students, the links between their higher education and their work bridged the class-based divide between academic and vocational study (in part because it allowed them to keep a foot in both camps). This is why we chose to illustrate the research with the case studies of twelve students from working class backgrounds. Their stories demonstrate the importance of part-time study as a route to successful widening participation in higher education.

### ***Benefiting the Region***

It is generally assumed that higher education has the potential to deliver the higher level knowledge and skills business demands. Our concern here is with the ways in which part-time study enhances (or, indeed, inhibits) that potential. At a superficial level, we can turn to the evidence of considerable employer support for part-time study in our own research (below) and to the calculation by Universities UK that approximately one quarter of part-time students nationally receive financial support from their employers (2005, p. 18-20) to conclude that this potential is being realised. After all, even allowing for the employers' suggestions that such financial support serves to attract and retain staff, it is highly unlikely that they would be so generous without expecting a more significant return on their investments.

Most of the students featured in the twelve cases were studying for degrees that were directly related to either their current or future employment and they all appreciated the opportunities their studies gave them to increase their work-related knowledge bases. Few of them suggested that they could have acquired that knowledge (or that much knowledge) through other means (such as, for example, private study) and this lends weight to the argument that engaging in higher education leads to increased higher level knowledge bases. So, for example, Beth acquired more knowledge that she was able to use in her current management position and Kelly was acquiring the knowledge she would need in her anticipated career as an interior designer. The benefits of study were not limited to the simple acquisition of knowledge, though: Graham's on-going studies had also given him the motivation and confidence to seek promotion.

Harriet, however, had suggested that her degree would not make her a better nurse and that she could, if she wanted or needed, obtain that knowledge elsewhere. Nor was she an exception: several other nurses we worked with made this same claim, and

Adam hinted at it (although the implication is that this claim is most likely to arise where higher education is a required form of CPD). Yet Harriet herself provided the answer to the question she effectively raised: she did not always seek out that knowledge and the knowledge she obtained through her studies. Similarly, Adam was introduced to the learning theories that he had not encountered before (and that he probably would not have encountered otherwise) and was able to take this new found knowledge back to his workplace.

Higher education was also an opportunity for these students to acquire higher level skills, including being able to understand and make use of complex data and being able to communicate it. Again, there was a general acknowledgement from the students that their studies had enhanced their skills. This was not always so clearly articulated because enhanced skills are typically less easy to quantify than enhanced knowledge but could be heard in the claim that the students were able to do their jobs better, more efficiently and so on. Interestingly, Christine did not make this claim but her employer made it on her behalf. Remaining with Christine's case, this adds the issue of confidence to the acquisition of skills – both in terms of her employer's specific reference to her increased confidence in making decisions and of her unwillingness to acknowledge it. Engaging with higher education required these students to engage with others (often to communicate newly acquired knowledge) in ways that demanded the use of skills that were not necessarily in such demand in the workplace.

However, whilst these cases support the argument that higher education does lead to the acquisition of higher level knowledge and skills, this benefit is not the preserve of part-time study. In questioning the specific benefits of part-time study, it is useful to look ahead to those studying in the private sector, below. Each of the three students from the private sector whose cases are featured in this report (below) had already obtained a first degree and each of them commented that their own part-time studies were more concerned with the application of knowledge than its mere acquisition.

Full-time students, whether progressing to higher education directly from school or returning later in life, do not necessarily have the opportunity to move from the acquisition of knowledge to its application. For part-time students in employment, particularly when required to complete assignments that specifically related to their work, it is almost unavoidable. They would draw on their employment in order to complete their assignments and then take what they had learned back into the workplace.

Moreover, where they had the option of choosing the focus of their studies (whether the complete degree programme, individual modules or particular assignments) they were often guided by their work. Emily, for example, had commenced an open degree with the Open University but soon chose to focus on the work-related Child and Youth Studies. Here, employment is an essential link between part-time study and the acquisition of higher level skills and knowledge and many of these students were engaged with higher education *because* their studies were work-related. Without the intercession of employment, it is highly unlikely that all twelve of them would have been engaged in higher education. This leads into what is perhaps the most fundamental link between part-time study, employment and knowledge transfer. Part-time study was the only route many of them could take through higher education

and without that option they would not have had the opportunity to acquire the high level skills and knowledge it delivers let alone transfer it to their workplaces.

A final observation, which is not as facile as it may seem, is that it requires great skill to successfully juggle commitments to part-time study, home life and work.

## **Part-Time Study in the Private Sector**

Higher level study is not the preserve of the universities and further education colleges delivering higher education. With higher education increasingly shifting towards a market-based approach we set out to make comparisons with part-time study in the private sector in order to ascertain whether market forces enhanced the student experience. The three cases included here represent the diversity of student experiences in the private sector. They show more similarities than differences: perhaps inevitably, students in the private sector also found it difficult to maintain a balance between their studies, their work and their home lives; and the cases highlight the social nature of learning and the significance of appropriate support from employers. However, they also draw attention to the importance of scheduling courses that suit the convenience of the students and the potential benefits of web-based resources.

We were guided by two criteria in selecting appropriate courses in the private sector for comparison: the level of study should be approximate to undergraduate level study and the course of study should be extended over a period of at least one year. Following these criteria, we worked with students studying for the NVQ (National Vocational Qualification) level 4, the exams organised by the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales and those organised by the Chartered Institute of Management. We followed the same methodology used for part-time students in higher education, progressively selecting students whose experiences represented the diversity and complexity of part-time study in the private sector and conducting life history interviews with them.

### ***The National Vocational Qualification, Level 4***

Simon was the deputy manager of a privately-run children's home and one of its six senior staff required to study the NVQ level 4. He had not required the qualification when he joined the company two years previously, but it had subsequently become a requirement 'to show that we're all properly trained and qualified.' He was dissatisfied at work (in part because of the company policy on attending training days for the NVQ) but recognised that the NVQ level 4 would make it easier to find other employment. However, if he had left within two years of completing the NVQ, he would have been required to pay back the cost of the course; and he felt this trapped him at work.

The course was arranged and paid for by the company but it 'just doesn't make it easy to do the NVQ.' Training days were held once a month at the company headquarters – located, as he made clear on several occasions – on the other side of the region and were attended by colleagues working in other homes. There were regular assessments when Simon's work was observed and essays and other exercises to be completed for each unit of study. Much of Simon's ire originated in the timetabling of the training days on his days off. He had been allowed study release but commitments at work meant that these were frequently cancelled and the company's response was to schedule the training days on his days off. He only got half a day's pay for this,



which rarely covered the travelling time, and he had to pay his own travel costs. Working long shifts, he felt that this was an unwarranted incursion into his own time.

Studying part-time enabled him to continue working and earning. He also pointed out that it meant ‘it doesn’t take over your life like full-time study does when everything revolves around being a bloody student.’ He appreciated the opportunities it gave him to meet colleagues working in other homes ‘so we can exchange ideas and whinge about the kids we work with. So it’s good for that social side.’ He was less satisfied with the course itself: he did not believe he was acquiring new knowledge or skills; he felt it was simply a means of validating what he already knew; he was frustrated because it repeated much of what he had studied for the NVQ3; and this frustration was exacerbated because he could only transfer a limited number of credits from the level 3 to the level 4. Simon already had a first degree and these frustrations were echoed by his graduate colleagues. Those without degrees were equally frustrated by the need to attend training days in their own time but this was typically offset by the feeling that they were acquiring new skills and knowledge.

The training days notwithstanding, completing the course was a lonely task for Simon because he was at a different stage to the rest of his colleagues from his own home; and this lessened the value of the networks that had grown up around his workplace and the training days. As he explained, ‘if you’re stuck with what you’re doing, then that’s it. It’s not like when you’re at university when you can and see someone if you don’t get it.’ He had posed this as a hypothetical situation as he had not found any of the work difficult but felt that he could have benefited from the course and progressed his own studies if there had been someone ‘to bounce your ideas off.’ However, the nearest person at his stage of the programme was working elsewhere and lived over fifty miles away; and, as he explained, ‘you can’t just pop round to their house and talk it through with them.’ Without this stimulation, he was left feeling it was a waste of time because ‘if I didn’t know all this, then I shouldn’t be doing my job.’

### ***Institute of Chartered Accountants of England & Wales Qualifications***

Sally had become an auditor after graduating with a degree in Business Studies and thoroughly enjoyed her work. She was required to take the chartered accountancy exams as part of ‘what’s called a “three year training contract”’; and, in keeping with the industry standard, she had paid study release (something she found particularly reassuring given the current environment in which many full-time university students need to work as well as study). Although attitudes vary between companies, there is a general expectation that trainees should pass their exams the first time. The nine exams are overseen by the ICAEW and cover a range of business areas from double entry accounting to human resources with the final paper being a case study requiring trainees to detail how they would advise clients.

There are two approaches to part-time study: day release over a longer period of time (averaging one day a month over eight months) or the more intensive block release. Sally took the latter option, alternating three weeks of study with four weeks at work over a period of three and a half months. She studied at one of the approved

accountancy colleges in London, attending classes from 9am to 4.30pm every day. Her tuition was lecture-based and drew heavily on case studies. As she explained:

It's not like when you're studying at university for your degree because it's not just learning but learning how to apply it. It's the doing it and relating it to everyday working practice. I think one of the other differences between this and the study that you do at university is that whereas at university you're learning new things, with this you're learning more about what you do and about what you're going to be doing [and] I think that makes it interesting because, like I say, I do actually enjoy what I do. So what you're doing when you're studying for these exams is relevant in a way that what you learn at university isn't always.

Assignments were set for 'homework' and additional study was expected and necessary. It was, Sally felt, sometimes difficult to motivate herself to study after a long day (whether at work or in the classroom) and she often stayed behind at college to study in peace. Although she did not know 'how much time I spent studying because it just seems to go on and on and on for ever' and she found the intensity of the course 'quite stressful' at times, she needed to pass the exams to keep her job. There was also the prospect of a significant increase in her salary once she successfully completed her training contract.

She found it difficult to fit these studies in with her social life and greatly appreciated having an understanding partner and considerate flatmates. There was some social life around the block weeks but everyone was focused on their studies and it reminded her of the final year at university. Sally found it was important to establish and maintain regular study schedules and concluded with the following thought:

if I was to give any advice to people who are studying, whether it's for the accountancy exams or any other exams, my top tip would be to make sure you know when you're going to finish studying for the day and stick to it.

### ***Chartered Institute of Management***

Having graduated without a clear idea of what he wanted to do, Afshin had concluded that he wanted to work in PR and was studying for a CIM diploma to enhance his prospects of getting the right job. He acknowledged that he would be able to engage with the course more if he was working in PR instead of an office but felt more confident about entering the world of PR because of it. It was also giving him 'more of a professional mentality towards work' because:

With my degree, I didn't take opportunities as much as I should have and I could have studied a lot harder. I sort of sat back for two years and just lived the university life and then, in my final year, realised what university meant. But I'm loving studying at the moment and it's okay now.

He was self-funding although the other ‘delegates’ on his course were already in marketing and many of them were being funded by their employers. Core textbooks were included in the price, as was a CD with copious notes (Afshin calculated 360 pages) for each module. His course consisted of four modules which he was studying over a period of one year: two in the first ten week term and one each in the second two terms. Each module involved an intensive two hour lecture once a week ‘so it’s very fast but it’s okay because I don’t think you could do it any other way’; and a one day weekend revision session was offered at the end of each module. Afshin described these lectures as ‘more of a conference’ and he found it extremely useful to be in a room with ‘people who work in marketing and they sort of bounce ideas off each other and you can learn from their experiences, which is great.’ He found the interactive nature of the lectures stimulating and, particularly given his reasons for studying, beneficial. The intensity of the timetable meant that there was a lot of background reading. The delegates could elect to be assessed by exam or assignment; and those opting for the assignments had written work throughout the course.

The internet was ‘really useful’ because the CIM website provides background reading, references and case studies; and Afshin found these case studies were seen as especially helpful because they ‘combine your theory and practice.’ As he pointed out, marketing is a particularly dynamic industry: ‘Purchase a book and it goes out of date within two days so, yes, it’s providing me with up-to-date information which is quite important for my course.’ The website also hosts a chat room so ‘you can communicate with other delegates around the country’ but he preferred face-to-face communication and did not make much use of this facility. Similarly, his tutors’ efforts to encourage group email discussions had foundered. He would have liked more interaction with his fellow delegates (and was quite candid about the networking opportunities this would give him) but recognised that this was difficult because everyone was so busy.

Living at home, he appreciated the support his family gave him, although he ruefully pointed out that his studies had strained his relationship with his girlfriend and had necessitated him giving up some of his other leisure activities. His employer allowed him to schedule his time off to suit his revision and exams but gave no other support. However, as Afshin acknowledged, his studies were not relevant to his job (although he felt that they enhanced his work) and signalled that he would be moving on.

### ***Summary: Part-Time Study in the Private Sector***

Although Simon, Sally and Afshin were all graduates, and although they identified differences between their first (full-time) degrees and the various qualifications they were studying for when they spoke with us, their experiences of part-time study bear considerable similarities to the students studying part-time for a first degree; and these similarities, as well as some of the differences, usefully illuminate key issues concerning part-time higher education.

Afshin’s comment that studying for the diploma had given him ‘more of a professional mentality towards work’ calls attention to the value of part-time study. He had graduated from university with no clear idea of what he wanted to do and he

needed the prospect of entering the job market to sharpen those ideas. By then, though, he needed to work and part-time study allowed him to earn an income whilst preparing for the career he wanted. This reflects the comments of the students in part-time higher education who came to realise what they wanted to do after leaving school.

His observation that he would have got more from the course had he been working in marketing at the time recalls Malcolm Tight's argument that 'only part-time higher education gives a genuinely real-life perspective to higher education' (1991, p. 144). This argument also finds life in the accounts given by the students in higher education. Yet whilst all three of the students here were studying for work-related qualifications, the contrasting cases of Simon and Sally suggest that, when employees are required to study as a condition of their employment, this genuine 'real-life perspective' can be greatly affected by the attitudes of those employers. They all acknowledged (albeit that Simon's acknowledgement was reluctant and Afshin's more hypothetical) that their studies were intended to enhance their professional abilities and that, unlike their first degrees, these studies were concerned with the application rather than the mere acquisition of knowledge. There were, then, clear benefits to their employers that extended beyond Simon's sceptical comment that it was little more than a safety net fashioned out of paper trails.

The levels of support that Simon and Sally received greatly influenced their willingness to engage with those studies. Sally had become a chartered accountant knowing that she would have to take these exams and received considerable support from her employer: she did not pay for her courses or the exams, she had generous study release and she anticipated a sizeable increase in her salary on qualifying. Simon, on the other hand, had been required to take the NVQ4 only after he had been appointed as deputy manager of the children's home and received far less support: his employers paid the fees but he had to attend training days in his own time with little compensation and there was no indication of any reward, other than keeping his job, on obtaining the qualification. Simon's disgruntlement was at least partly located in his employer's decision to re-arrange the training days so that the employees were required to attend them in their own time rather than on company time as had been the case; and his feelings were not allayed by what he considered to be inadequate compensation. The effect was to quash any enthusiasm he might otherwise have had and to alienate him from his studies. This did not simply leave him disgruntled: it clouded his perspective so much that he could see no benefits to his studies. The levels of support employers are prepared to offer can, then, significantly influence the approach employees take towards their studies.

However, Simon also had fewer opportunities to exploit his studies because he did not have access to the networks that would have allowed him 'to bounce [his] ideas off' other people. Afshin made clear that engaging with the other delegates on his course was a great benefit; and, although Sally described a retreat into isolation in order to study, she had these networks in her workplace. Simon's concerns, then, draw further attention to the social nature of learning and the importance of creating conditions that foster their development and maintenance.

This also draws attention to the importance of scheduling classes that suit the convenience of the student rather than the institution delivering the study: Simon

resented having to attend training days on his days off; Sally was thankful for her paid study leave; and Afshin appreciated the opportunities to attend lectures in the evening so that he could work during the day.

Afshin benefited from the face-to-face interactions with his fellow part-time delegates, and eschewed the online alternatives, but he also appreciated the comparatively extensive web-based resources available to him. Few other students – whether in the colleges, universities or private sector – had access to so much web-based material; and for Afshin, studying in order to change careers, this provided an invaluable resource that he could not obtain elsewhere.

Whereas Afshin's case has been included here to highlight the potential significance of web-based resources (particularly in work-related study) the contrast between Simon and Sally's cases draws attention to the importance of appropriate employer support if employees are to provide returns on their part-time studies. To this extent, there seems to be little fundamental difference between the experiences of part-time students in the private and public sectors. The private sector, typically closely liaising with the employers, seems more attuned to the need to offer courses that fit the requirements of the students. However, the universities and colleges appear to offer greater opportunities for social networking (although the students did not necessarily acknowledge this); and, as these three cases here illustrate, this is a significant element in successful engagements with part-time study.

## **The Employers' Perspectives**

As the case studies of the students in both the public and private sectors indicate, the support of employers can make a significant contribution to successful engagement with part-time higher education and its equivalents. In seeking their perspectives of part-time higher education we turned to a number of the region's major public and private sector employers and small and medium sized employers in the private sector. There was broad support for employees through a wide range of vocational and academic programmes; but our focus here is on their support for part-time undergraduate level programmes delivered in and accredited by the universities and colleges and their equivalents from the private sector. It was not surprising that the employers were willing to support their employees when they were enrolled on work-related degrees but there was also support for those on non-work-related programmes. To pursue this further, we secured permission from two of the students studying for degrees that were not immediately related to their current employment (Stephen and Christine) to talk to their employers. Here we present the perspectives of a major engineering firm, one of the region's County Councils, a major company working in the service industry and a small enterprise.

### ***Big Business***

The engineering firm we worked with is a major regional employer with over 2,000 employees, approximately three quarters of whom are employed on the manufacturing side of the business and 300 in the Design Office. The company boasts a strong commitment to staff development extending from in-house courses and craft-based apprenticeships to support for postgraduate research; and this support is demonstrated through encouragement to study, the payment of course fees, study release and travel expenses. A quarter of the Design Office's training budget is allocated on courses leading to academic qualifications and, at any one time, approximately thirty employees are involved in some sort of academic development. At the time of this research, this included: one person studying for an MBA, two studying for an MSc, twelve studying for honours degrees and the rest completing their HNCs or HNDs. The company works with a number of HEIs, both within the region and beyond its borders, depending on the particular specialisations they offer. Employees have some freedom to choose their own course 'because it's important that people continue to think for themselves' although some guidance may be offered in order to meet the company's needs. The company considers this level of investment to be good value because it helps to attract and retain good staff in a competitive environment.

The County Council's approach to staff development through academic study was driven by the need for effectively delivery of services and recent restructuring that had required a higher proportion of staff to take on managerial responsibilities demanding generic management skills. Within this context, it is recognised that many staff, particularly those who have been employed for some time, are very skilled but lack formal qualifications. Consequently, the council has a flexible and supportive approach to staff development and encourages those without appropriate qualifications to study for them. There is a 'Competences Framework' for all management training programmes from foundation to advanced courses; and most programmes are in-house. Team leading courses have recently been introduced and

are validated by the Institute of Leadership and Management. Staff are given time off to take the courses and for assessment; and all facilities, including teaching space and a Learning Resources Centre, are provided at County Hall. There is also provision for postgraduate study. Although the qualifications are the specific driver of these programmes, the council appears to be concerned that staff acquire skills rather than simply accumulate those qualifications; and they are encouraged to take single modules or attend classes for single topics within those modules. There are no entry-level requirements for either partial attendance or full programmes of study. An inherent advantage of all these courses is that they are focused on work-based learning and so staff practise newly acquired skills and/or carry out projects which have a specific work-related goal as part of the course. A further advantage of these courses is that they are attractive to staff because they lead to nationally recognised qualifications and therefore enhance employability. However, the council is sufficiently concerned with the issue of retention that staff have to sign a form promising to repay any course costs if they leave within two years.

The Service Industry offered a more personal view of part-time study. Although Stephen was studying for a Counselling degree that had no relevance to his work, his employers allowed him to attend classes on Wednesday afternoon. They agreed that he would be flexible and 'pay the time back' when it was needed 'so it worked for the company.' These arrangements were possible because Stephen worked within a team that could cover the Wednesday afternoons in his absence; and it was a condition of this support that the arrangements would be reviewed at intervals to ensure that any changes in the company's requirements could be taken into account. From the company's perspective, the return on this support was that Stephen would be available to work beyond the core 9am-5pm hours. These arrangements did not present any immediate difficulties, either to the company or to Stephen. It was, though, acknowledged that a change in Stephen's role or structural changes within his team could impact upon the arrangement. The arrangement therefore 'could not be cast in stone indefinitely.'

### ***Small Enterprises***

The impact of supporting employees in their part-time studies is potentially far greater for small sized enterprises (those with no more than fifty full-time staff) because that support, whether financial or in terms of time off from work, represents a proportionately higher investment in the individual employee. Christine's employer, Ben, had made a significant investment in her studies: not only was he prepared to allow her to attend the university during regular working hours (something that, particularly given the irregular scheduling of her lectures and seminars, they both acknowledged put a strain on their working relationship) but he also paid her fees. This, it should be remembered, was for a degree in philosophy.

Ben had been prepared to support her to this extent because he had seen considerable potential for professional and personal development in her; and he saw her degree as an appropriate means for her to achieve this potential. He also felt that Christine's CV was 'incomplete' without a first degree and, particularly given her managerial role, he believed that it would provide a clear statement of her abilities – not only to a

wider audience but also to Christine herself. To explain his decision, he drew an illuminating comparison with the management courses she had previously attended. These professional and vocational qualifications ‘make clear that she is a best practitioner and that’s important’ but the courses had not ‘challenged the boundaries of her perception.’ That is, whilst the management courses had proved her professional competence (what she was capable of doing) they ‘didn’t challenge her intellectually, they didn’t demonstrate what she is capable of’ (what she was capable of being).

With his business growing and a preference for a ‘hands off’ style of leadership, Ben believed that his investment in her degree was already providing valuable returns. He had seen her confidence grow and noted that her ability to make evidence-based decisions had improved in terms of both the quality of those decisions and her willingness to make them. He also anticipated future returns on her ability to demonstrate and provide leadership.

However, there was a price to pay for this support that extended far beyond the cost of her fees and Christine’s time away from work. Ben felt that it was reasonable to release her from work for one day (or two half days) a week but the peculiar requirements of Christine’s course, as she made clear in her own account, placed a strain on their working relationship and he was tired of hearing about her lecturers’ inflexibility. Acknowledging that she was ‘caught between the devil and the deep blue sea’ in maintaining her commitment to her work and to her studies, he explained that it was ‘tough for both of us – tough for her managing those commitments and tough for me having to draw a line between those commitments.’ It was, he added with considerable understatement, ‘a big ask for a small business.’

## ***Summary***

The employers we spoke to generally saw undergraduate level study as important and, within a broader framework of support for vocational and/or academic study, were prepared to support employees in part-time higher education. They recognised that undergraduate level study provided both knowledge and skills that would be of value to both the employer and to the individual employees. They also acknowledged that their support offered a means to attract and retain staff. The view of the County Council was especially refreshing, particularly at a time when education is increasingly viewed as nothing more than a commodity (Watts, 2006).

The levels of support varied, from paying fees and travel expenses to arranging for employees to take time off for their studies, either as study release or in lieu. The most support was offered to those who were studying for work-related qualifications but this clearly extended beyond the relevance of course content and there was keen support for the acquisition of the higher level skills an undergraduate programme is supposed to provide. Thus, both the major engineering company and the small enterprise were prepared to offer comprehensive support to employees studying degrees that were superficially unrelated to their work. In these cases, and most



clearly in the case of the small enterprise, the key was that the employees were able to demonstrate that their studies were pertinent.

Stephen received less support from his employers in the service industry (although it must be acknowledged here that his degree signalled an intention to change careers) but was authorised to attend classes one afternoon a week as long as that time was made up elsewhere. This arrangement was made easier because his classes were regularly scheduled and this provides a stark contrast with the attendance requirements of Christine's degree.

Her employer was not concerned that her philosophy degree might have been unsuitable or irrelevant to her managerial work. He had been prepared to invest money and time in her degree because he believed it would allow her to reach her potential. That investment was 'a big ask for a small business' but he had already seen returns on it. However, the particular circumstances of her unpredictable timetable had placed an unnecessary strain on her work and on their working relationship. Whereas Beth's employers were able to accommodate her regular Thursday afternoon classes with ease, Christine's employer had to work around a capricious schedule that required her to be absent from work up to three half days every week of the semester and made no allowances for forward planning.

These employers were supportive, and often highly supportive, of their employees' part-time studies. They recognised that they would see a return on their investment in terms of the knowledge and skills their employees were acquiring and also in terms of loyalty. Most of them were able to accommodate the requirements of part-time study with relative ease. However, Ben's perspective from the small enterprise was troubled by Christine's irregular timetable. His willingness to acknowledge her commitment to her studies provides a sharp contrast with the university's willingness to acknowledge her commitment to her work; and this leads us towards the question of proper investment in part-time higher education.

## **Future Investment**

Investing in learning in the twenty-first century is the equivalent of investment in the machinery and technical innovation that was essential to the first great industrial revolution. Then it was physical capital: now it is human capital (DfEE, 1997, p. 5)

There is an increasing demand for a more highly qualified workforce at regional, national and global levels; and higher education is seen as central to its development. As we have shown here, part-time study is already making a significant contribution to the regional economic and social strategies by enabling more people and more people from historically under-represented groups to engage with higher education. Moreover, whereas there are concerns about the net outflow of graduates from the East of England, part-time students are much more likely to remain in the region.

As the costs of full-time study – in terms of fees, debts and deferred earnings – increases, part-time study is likely to become a more attractive as a means of investing in higher education. Yet it, too, carries a cost – particularly in terms of time and the strain it can place upon family, social and working lives. It is clear from the experiences of the students that we worked with that they were willing to invest in their higher education. However, it is also clear that part-time study has a greater potential that is not, as yet, being realised. As higher education funding policies undergo yet more changes, there is a need to redress the imbalances between government investments in full- and part-time study (Crewe, 2005). Furthermore, whilst there are striking examples of good practice from institutions offering part-time study and from businesses and industry supporting part-time students, further investment is required if part-time higher education is to more fully contribute to the regional economic and social strategies.

There are huge untapped reserves of skill and experience amongst adults in the East of England and higher education can direct this potential towards regional development. However, the focus on a one-off opportunity for school leavers continues to dominate perceptions of higher education and continues to influence institutions, employers and the public (particularly potential students). Many of the issues concerning the successful provision and delivery of part-time higher education may be linked to the failure to recognise that almost half the undergraduate population of the East of England, and nearly a third of those studying for a first degree, are studying part-time.

At the same time, and even though the Open University and Anglia Ruskin have more than 30,000 part-time students between them, there is little evidence of the actual demand for part-time higher education. Institutions may wish to instigate needs surveys amongst the over-18 population in their regional bailiwicks in order to ascertain potential students' needs for flexible part-time programmes.

Part-time study is still largely seen as an add-on to mainstream higher education programmes delivered to full-time students (the Open University is always an exception here) and the promotion and publicity of part-time options is very limited. Institutions that are more geared towards traditional forms of higher education are less

likely to offer institutional support to part-time students; and part-time students are more likely to be better supported in the further education sector where there is a longer history of outreach to non-traditional students. The potential of e-learning has yet to be assessed and assimilated in part-time programmes at many institutions.

There is a need for greater investment in part-time higher education but is it worth it? We will let Kelly, a young single mother struggling to complete her degree in Interior Design on a part-time basis answer that question:

There's no way that I'm going to stop. I'm not doing that. No, there's no way I'm going to quit. I'll have to find some way of paying for this. I mean, they are making it as difficult as possible but I'll have to do whatever I can to finish it. Because it's all I can see myself doing. I don't want to go back and work in a shop. There's no point in doing something if you have no interest in it. I want to stick with this and I don't want to be dropping out of things all of the time so I want to actually finish. Can I go somewhere with it or not? If you drop out, you can't go anywhere.

### **Individual Investments**

The twelve case studies presented in this report (that is, the case focusing on the students in part-time higher education rather than those studying towards higher level qualifications in the private sector) show that people are willing to invest in higher education, often in the face of considerable difficulties. The cases have been selected to show that people of all ages can engage with part-time higher education (although we have excluded those part-time students in or approaching retirement from this report) and that their studies can enhance their current employment and future employment prospects. They also indicate that part-time study can enable those from historically under-represented social groups to engage with higher education. All too often, though, these investments are being made in spite of rather than because of the part-time higher education experience; and if they illustrate the 'success stories' they also indicate why other students drop out of part-time courses and other people simply do not apply.

The investments these students made in their part-time studies were considerable. They put time, effort and money in and often went to great lengths to juggle their studies with their commitments at home and at work. They tested the support of their families and risked friendships. They were prepared to dash from work for their seminars, attend classes late in the evening, arrive at the office early in the morning to make up time spent in lectures and then spent their weekends and evenings studying at home. They invested money in their studies as well: not just in fees but in travel, materials, books (particularly when they were unable to use the institutional libraries) and childcare. Graham even reduced his working week to protect his study time.

For some, these investments were already paying off. Graham was able to reduce his working week because his earning potential had already increased; others were anticipating increased salaries, promotions or jobs elsewhere; and there was a general expectation that their degrees would enhance their employability. However, there

were also non-financial returns and most of these students spoke of increasing confidence, recognition of their abilities and a sense of accomplishment. Moreover, most of them were enjoying the opportunity to study again. It was often these non-financial benefits that kept them going.

It is clear from these accounts that the students found it easier to make and maintain their investments when others invested in them; and although our focus here is on investments made by their institutions and/or employers we should not overlook or underestimate the investments made by family and friends.

### **Immediate Institutional Investments**

Part-time students tend not feel part of the wider institutional community. Indeed, at a recent conference on part-time higher education, one university Vice Chancellor was heard explaining that he often felt as if he had two universities – one of full-time and one of part-time students. There was a widespread feeling that at least some institutions did not appreciate the difficulties part-time students experienced in juggling their family, work and study commitments. Problems ranged from the failure to ensure that students studying in the evenings were able to access refreshments (even if this only meant that vending machines worked) or register for courses ‘out of hours’ through to the failure to recognise that those studying during the day would benefit from advance timetabling in order to arrange time away from work and sympathetic timetabling to ensure that classes and lectures are grouped together on the same days. With most institutions geared towards full-time students, such problems can leave part-time students feeling out of place, undervalued or simply exploited.

It may be possible to resolve some of these issues by offering alternatives to face-to-face communication such as websites or even, for matters such as registration, phone calls and/or emails (although it should be acknowledged that many part-time students appear reluctant to use their institutional email addresses). Other issues, such as timetabling arrangements are clearly more difficult to address (particularly when any resolution may impact upon full-time students). However, the simple acknowledgement that part-time students face are likely to experience particular problems relating to their part-time status – and sharing that acknowledgement with them – may go some way to making them feel valued and wanted.

Very few of these students mentioned induction courses to help them find their way (both physically and intellectually) around higher education. It may not be possible to arrange such courses to fit in with the lifestyles of all part-time students, but paper copies or virtual tours would go some considerable way towards making them feel at home. Information about support services and careers guidance should be included. Engaging with higher education was a daunting and difficult process for many of these students, particularly those who had quit compulsory education some time ago; and it should be a matter of some concern that many of these students reported more support from their fellow part-time students than from their tutors and lecturers (although it should be added that tutorial support was appreciated when it was made available). Short courses (again with paper or virtual options) making clear the nature

of higher education and, where appropriate, its relationship with work-based learning, may help part-time students settle into their studies with greater ease and confidence. It may be that some students will not be able or willing to attend such courses, but giving them the option (as well as paper or virtual copies) is likely to make them feel that they belong to and are valued members of the higher education community.

Most of these students had formed their own communities, although this was much easier for those on specific part-time programmes than it was for those studying part-time on full-time programmes. When they worked, these communities offered vital academic and social support, allowing the students to overcome a sense of isolation. It is extremely difficult to artificially create such communities, but institutions can provide catalysts to encourage them by establishing fora (including virtual fora) that bring part-time students together. It may be more effective to support institutional Students Unions (or, where they are in place, Mature Students Unions) to provide such meeting places. Such fora could also give part-time students a collective voice so that they can speak up about their concerns of feeling out of place, undervalued or simply exploited.

Such measures – particularly those that require little more than extending existing student services to part-time students or raising awareness of these services – require little more than the recognition that part-time students must negotiate particular issues that typically bypass full-time students.

There is also the issue of financial investment. This need is most clearly illustrated here in the cases of Hayley (who was denied access to her university because she was unable to pay her fees) and Kelly (whose fees were met because she was income support but who had experienced great difficulties making other ends meet). The financial burdens of higher education are most likely to weigh heavily on the most socially disadvantaged groups; and it is, perhaps, no coincidence that both Hayley and Kelly are Black single mothers. As most institutions make at least some provision for financial aid, including the government's Access to Learning Funds, such support may be realised simply by making part-time students aware of what is already available.

### **Strategic Institutional Investments**

Strategic investments in part-time higher education concern the provision of part-time courses – whether specific part-time programmes or options to study full-time programmes on a part-time basis. Part-time study has the potential to increase the overall numbers of students in higher education and the number of students from social groups that have been historically excluded from participation and that are targeted in current widening participation programmes. To successfully engage these potential students in higher education, there is a need to provide courses that they can access, participate in, progress through and graduate from. This need must be located in policies (from the abolition of grants through to the introduction of top up fees) that have more clearly repositioned the student as a consumer in the marketplace of higher education and opened up that marketplace to a wider audience. Put bluntly, for good

or bad, higher education is a commodity to be bought and sold; and institutions delivering (or selling) higher education must respond to that.

One such response may be to make existing courses more attractive to potential part-time students. A second response requires a longer term investment in part-time programmes that will attract those who are currently unable or unwilling to engage in higher education. Making such programmes work will require a shift away from the seemingly *ad hoc* approach to much part-time provision to the strategic development of programmes that will provide a more obvious (albeit potential) return on the investments made by students and those investing in them. This is something that institutions delivering higher education cannot tackle alone; and it adds to the argument for greater collaboration between the region's universities, colleges, EEDA (particularly Investors in Community and the Regional Skills and Competitiveness Partnership), the lifelong learning networks, businesses and industry and the Sector Skills Councils.

### **Investment from Business and Industry**

Business and industry can (and, indeed, should) also invest in part-time higher education. It is a cost-effective means of staff development and, as the case studies in this report indicate, investing in employees who choose to study has the potential to provide real returns in the form of a more highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce. Despite (and also, perhaps, because of) the challenges presented by part-time higher education, it can provide further returns in the form of a more confident and satisfied workforce. Effective support can range from encouragement and awareness raising through flexible working arrangements and time off to attend seminars and lectures (as well as time off for revision and exams) to financial support for fees and books. Where such support was offered to the students we worked with, it was acknowledged and appreciated.

At a strategic level, there is a need to invest knowledge in the institutions delivering part-time higher education. Foundation degrees and other forms of work-based learning require such investment if they are to be effective (Seiffert & Mills, 2005). Students in higher education are being increasingly positioned as 'consumers' paying their way through an educational market place; and they will increasingly demand a return on their investments. Institutions need to know and respond to the demands of business and industry if they are to offer courses that will attract part-time students because those courses enhance their employability.



## Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended to address these issues at regional and institutional levels. As we have noted above, some institutions and industries are already making a greater investment in part-time higher education than others. Nonetheless, the wider issue of part-time study as a mere addition to more traditional forms of higher education remains deeply entrenched. It requires concerted effort if it is to be resolved and providers of part-time higher education should promote the advantages of part-time study more strongly.

At the regional level, the Association of Universities in the East of England, in collaboration with the East of England Development Agency and other partners in the Regional Skills and Competitiveness Partnership, should:

- coordinate the publication of a regional prospectus setting out the advantages of part-time study and the opportunities it offers and strenuously promote part-time higher education to employers through the Skills for Business Network, the CBI, Business Links and other agencies;
- promote and progress – with appropriate business sector support – the development of e-learning courses relevant to regional priorities as an extension of existing part-time study opportunities;
- establish a Learning and Skills Sub-group (in line with most other Regional Higher Education Associations) which would have a specific remit to support and promote part-time higher education and which would liaise with and incorporate representatives from the Association of Colleges in the Eastern Region, the Regional Skills and Competitiveness Partnership, i10, Investing in Communities, the Skills for Business Network and regional businesses and industry;
- conduct an audit of all part-time provision in the region;
- coordinate an annual conference reviewing and promoting part-time higher education;
- make representations to the Higher Education Funding Council and regional MPs concerning the need for parity of government support for part- and full-time students; and
- make representations to the Higher Education Statistics Agency concerning the need to record Open University statistics on a regional as well as national basis to enable full regional analyses to be undertaken.

Institutions should:

- make clear their policies concerning part-time study;
- consider whether to focus more part-time courses in linked FE colleges rather than main university campuses;
- review their fee payment systems to enable part-time students to pay in monthly instalments; and
- make representations to local MPs concerning the need for parity of government support for part- and full-time students.



- offer diagnostic or taster courses to help potential students understand what is expected when studying for a higher education (whether part- or full-time); and
- enhance (or, where necessary, introduce) specific induction courses (not necessarily face-to-face) for part-time students.
- liaise more closely with regional and local business and industry and the Skills for Business Network to develop appropriate part-time programmes.
- seriously investigate the use of e-learning as a tool to increase the take-up of part-time higher education and the successful retention of part-time students; and
- examine the potential for using Open University materials in support of their part-time students.
- review the availability of facilities and support for part-time students (e.g. library, counselling/advice and careers services) and explore options that increase their accessibility (e.g. on-line and telephone options as well as occasional evening and/or weekend opening hours);
- take steps to ensure part-time students, and potential part-time students, are aware of and can access governmental and/or institutional financial support packages;
- make efforts to ensure that part-time students feel part of the institutional community and ensure they are made fully aware of the facilities and support available to them as members of those communities; and
- investigate the use of mobile messaging as a means of keeping in touch with part-time students.
- review and enhance part-time student records to generate databases providing greater knowledge of who takes up part-time study, their motivation and success;
- develop and publicise case studies illustrating how part-time higher education has helped both individual students and employers in the region in order to increase awareness of the value of part-time study to both individuals and employers; and
- consider establishing (in conjunction with EEDA, AUEE, the Regional Skills and Competitiveness Partnership and the wider business community) annual awards for those part-time students who have achieved the most in using their studies to enhance their careers.

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## **Making and Missing Opportunities: Part-Time Higher Education in the East of England**

**Michael Watts, Jane Cullen and Roger Mills**

The widening participation agenda for higher education seeks to increase both the overall numbers of students in higher education and the participation rates of those from historically under-represented social groups. With many potential students unwilling or unable to commit to full-time study, part-time study offers a means to reaching the government's participation targets. More importantly, it offers students the opportunity to engage in forms of higher education that they recognise as meaningful, relevant and valuable. However, the highly significant contribution part-time study makes to the widening participation agenda is not always acknowledged. Watts, Cullen and Mills set out to redress this here by examining the expectations and experiences of part-time students in three different settings in the East of England: in Universities (Anglia Ruskin University, The University of East Anglia and Luton and the Open University in the East of England); in further education colleges (North Hertfordshire College, Peterborough Regional College, and Suffolk College); and in the workplace. A statistical overview demonstrates the importance of part-time study in delivering higher education in the region and detailed analyses of students' experiences examine the interactions between their social, working and student lives and the benefits and disadvantages of part-time study.

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